

JEWISH PHILOSOPHY  
PERSPECTIVES AND RETROSPECTIVES

**EMUNOT: JEWISH PHILOSOPHY AND KABBALAH**

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# JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

## PERSPECTIVES AND RETROSPECTIVES

Edited by  
Raphael JOSPE and Dov SCHWARTZ

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On the cover: A bifolio, dismembered from a manuscript (14th-century, Spain), containing the first page of Perush Ha-Millot Ha-Zarot (1213), a glossary by Samuel ibn Tibbon, appended to his Hebrew translation of Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed. The bifolio was reused in 1713 as a cover of a register of the series "Giusdicenze." Hebrew Fragment 520.1 in the State Archive of Modena, Italy, kindly provided by Prof. Mauro Perani of the University of Bologna.

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## CONTENTS

Editors' Introduction	7
<i>Raphael Jospe and Dov Schwartz</i>	
PART I	
Introduction to Part I	10
<i>Alan Mittleman</i>	
Coming After: American Jewish Thought in Light of German Judaism	20
<i>Leora Batnitzky</i>	
Doing Jewish Philosophy in America	33
<i>Lenn E. Goodman</i>	
Thinking Through Scripture and Liturgy after the Shoah	57
<i>Steven Kepnes</i>	
Jewish Thought and Contemporary Philosophy	71
<i>Michael L. Morgan</i>	
Jewish Philosophy in North America	79
<i>David Novak</i>	
On the Renaissance of Jewish Philosophy in America	104
<i>Norbert M. Samuelson</i>	
Covenant and Social Contract: Classical Judaism and Classical Liberalism	122
<i>Kenneth Seeskin</i>	
Philosophy, Jewish Thought, and the American Setting in My Work	129
<i>Martin D. Yaffe</i>	
Jewish Philosophy and American Democracy	146
<i>William A. Galston</i>	
Response	150
<i>Paul Mendes-Flohr</i>	

## PART II

Maimonides on the Eternity of the World <i>Howard Kreisel</i>	157
Maimonides on Creation <i>Kenneth Seeskin</i>	185
Comments on Seeskin and Kreisel's Essays on Maimonides on Creation <i>Roslyn Weiss</i>	200
Comments on Professor Kreisel's Paper <i>Charles H. Manekin</i>	215
The Identity of the Sabians: Some Insights <i>Haggai Mazuz</i>	233
Moses Ibn Tibbon's Concept of Vital Heat: A Reassessment of Peripatetic Epistemology in Terms of Natural Science <i>Ottfried Fraisse</i>	255
The Phenomenology of Faith R. Soloveitchik's Analysis in <i>And From There You Shall Seek</i> <i>Dov Schwartz</i>	279
Interactions between Karaite and Rabbanite Thought in Spain and Byzantium <i>James T. Robinson</i>	315
'Anti Maimonidean Maimonideanism'? Some Remarks on a New Publication <i>Yossef Schwartz</i>	319

## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Much of the credit for the original conception of the symposia and studies in this volume properly goes to our colleague and friend, Steven Harvey, whose talent, dedication, and hard work provided a solid base for our own work.

There is an irony to the fact that our first symposium, on "The Renaissance of Jewish Philosophy in America," organized by Alan Mittleman, was conceived in response to Paul Mendes-Flohr's observation that "Jewish philosophers seem to be a dying breed," in a lecture titled "Jewish Philosophy: An Obituary." However tongue-in-cheek the statement may have been at the close of the twentieth century, particularly when made by a scholar of modern Jewish thought, a similarly pessimistic observation was made quite seriously at the beginning of the twentieth century by Isaac Husik in his *History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (1916), which he concludes with the sad words, "There are Jews now and there are philosophers, but there are no Jewish philosophers and there is no Jewish philosophy."

This volume is akin to Mark Twain's famous observation that "the reports of my death are greatly exaggerated." Its birth, as one more modest contribution to the exponentially increasing list of publications in Hebrew and other languages of original thought and scholarly analysis, proves that obituaries for Jewish philosophy and thought are exaggerated, premature, and ultimately far off the mark. Husik's own work helped start the revival of a field for which he—like nineteenth century scholars of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*—mistakenly thought he was writing an epitaph.

Our second symposium, on "Maimonides on the Eternity of the World," provides a similar opportunity to continue the ongoing debate initiated by the medieval commentators and still challenging us today, regarding Maimonides' "true" opinion on this central philosophical and theological question. Our selection of scholarly studies also reflects our conviction that Jewish thought must be examined in all its periods and

literary genres, and our commitment to presenting as rich a variety of perspectives as possible.

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), whose career included scholarly studies of medieval philosophers including Sa'adiah Gaon, Solomon ibn Gabirol, Moses Maimonides, and Don Isaac Abrabanel, and who taught generations of rabbinical students at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, became one of the most influential Jewish philosophers of his generation, known among non-Jews as well as within the Jewish community. In the last chapter of his seminal *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (1956), he wrote:

The task of Jewish philosophy today is not only to describe the essence, but also to set forth the universal relevance of Judaism, the bearings of its demands upon the chance of man to remain human . . . To be a Jew is to be committed to the experience of great ideas. The task of Jewish philosophy is to formulate not only these ideas, but also the depth of that commitment, in vivid, consistent thinking. The task of Jewish philosophy is to make our thinking compatible with our destiny.

It is our hope that *Jewish Philosophy: Perspectives and Retrospectives* will, in its own small way, encourage the growing interest in the study, the teaching, and ultimately the doing of Jewish philosophy and thought.

*Raphael Jospe    Dov Schwartz*  
 רפאל יוספה      דב שוורץ



# Part I

# INTRODUCTION

Alan MITTLEMAN

In a lecture delivered at Oxford in 1999, the distinguished Jewish intellectual historian Paul Mendes-Flohr offered—with tongue somewhat in cheek—an obituary for Jewish philosophy. He suggested that “Jewish philosophers seem to be a dying breed,” “lamentably few and far between.”<sup>1</sup> Mendes-Flohr thought this a most regrettable situation. Philosophy, in his view, had throughout the ages obliged Judaism “to bear, so to speak, its best countenance and to flesh out the universal implications of biblical teachings... To put it boldly and even rather bluntly, I would submit that philosophy serves to secure Israel from idolatry and a tribalization of God and Torah.”<sup>2</sup> Woe unto the generation, then, for which philosophy has been marginalized.

Given the exalted and religiously crucial role which Mendes-Flohr assigned to the philosophical impulse within Jewish experience, why has there been a decline in philosophy? Part of the reason is the tragic and untimely end of German Jewry. German Jews, particularly in the twentieth century, renewed Jewish philosophy in a manner unparalleled since the medieval encounter of Judaism and Greek philosophy, as mediated by Islam. German philosophical culture was rich, audaciously so, in metaphysical speculation and ethical analysis, and offered frameworks of discourse in which Jewish intellectuals could grapple with the universal implications of their tradition. The great modern architects of constructive Jewish thought, such as Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, and Franz Rosenzweig, embarked on a project that could not be continued in an organic way after

<sup>1</sup> Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Jewish Philosophy: An Obituary* (Oxford: Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, 1999), 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

the culture that nurtured it was destroyed. The thinkers who followed in their wake, such as Abraham Joshua Heschel, Joseph Soloveitchik, and Emil Fackenheim, brought the European modalities of thought to the United States, but with the passing of their generation the traditions of existentialism, phenomenology and philosophical anthropology were played out. The American temper and climate required its own mode of philosophical creativity. Add to this the predominant concern for Jewish survival or continuity, first in the wake of the Holocaust and then in the face of weakening communal bonds and demographic prospects, and one has an orientation toward the practical and the particular, not toward the universal and the theoretical, as philosophy arguably requires. For the same reasons, Israel does not yet provide a nurturing environment for Jewish philosophy.

Mendes-Flohr did acknowledge that there are some Jewish philosophers working in academic philosophy and religion departments, “but they speak virtually only among themselves.”<sup>3</sup> The sociology of intellectual life in the United States militates against a public role for philosophers. Of course, this was not always the case. In the mid-twentieth century, John Dewey and his disciples (among whom must be counted the Jewish thinker Mordecai Kaplan) insisted on a public role for philosophy. In their view, if philosophy was not speaking to a broad audience about important matters of public and cultural life, it was suspect.<sup>4</sup> But Dewey gave way to Quine, so to speak. Philosophy in America took a different, highly specialized path, and left “public philosophers” looking like amateur philosophers. The Jewish philosophers of today to whom Mendes-Flohr refers are ensconced in their university departments, victims of the general irrelevance of philosophy to the life of the nation at large.

The last factor adduced by Mendes-Flohr in the modern decline of Jewish philosophy is the advent of postmodernism. On the one hand,

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Nehamas, “Trends in Recent American Philosophy,” in *American Academic Culture in Transition: Fifty Years, Four Disciplines*, ed. Thomas Bender and Carl E. Schorske (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 228. See also Bruce Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America, 1720-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), *passim* on the general decline of religiously oriented philosophy beginning in the nineteenth century and its replacement by technical, scientifically oriented philosophy.

postmodernism has opened space for a pluralist affirmation of cultures and, arguably, religious perspectives. Postmodernism has claimed to liberate us from the hegemonic rationalism of a philosophic tradition stretching, as Rosenzweig put it, from Ionia to Jena. That, presumably, would provide some cover for a distinctly Jewish program of philosophical construction. On the other hand, postmodernism embodies a “retreat from a universal, indivisible truth” which has “a deleterious effect on metaphysically and ontologically oriented theology and philosophy.”<sup>5</sup> Academically fashionable postmodernism, in Mendes-Flohr’s view, is uncongenial to Jewish philosophizing: “. . . were Jewish thought to ally itself with postmodernism’s epistemological agnosticism it will court disaster, for it and its relativistic presuppositions will ultimately undermine the hope of revitalizing Judaism as an intellectually, spiritually and morally compelling way of life.”<sup>6</sup>

Given this bleak assessment of the prospects for Jewish philosophy in the United States, why do we dare to speak here of a “renaissance of Jewish philosophy”? Jewish philosophers may indeed be few and far between (when was this not so?), and their influence may be limited (Rosenzweig himself remarked that his book was more displayed than read), but there is movement afoot. Thirty years ago, when this author began graduate school, Jewish philosophy was strictly a historical category. Anything worth reading was written in Greek (Philo), medieval philosophical Hebrew and Arabic, or German. English-language Jewish thought was largely apologetic, the work of intellectual congregational rabbis. An important scholarly literature about Jewish philosophy existed in English, of course, but contemporary Jewish philosophy as such did not. That has changed. There are today dozens of well trained, academically accomplished philosophers of Jewish background who have chosen to turn their attention to Jewish thought and to enter the perennial conversation about the ultimate significance of Jewish life. The fact that they have yet to find a broad audience seems to this author less important than that they have turned to a set of concerns that are fundamentally public, existentially urgent, politically (in the best sense of the word) engaged, and intellectually important. “Renaissance”

<sup>5</sup> Mendes-Flohr, *Jewish Philosophy*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

may be too grandiose a term for the movement on which we reflect here, but it well evokes the promising cross-pollination of the present moment.

Just as German-Jewish philosophizing developed in protracted conversation with German thought, so does American Jewish philosophy engage both American intellectual traditions and the world of moral, political, and cultural concerns of contemporary Americans. American Jewish philosophy must thus take seriously such traditions as pragmatism, analytic philosophy, philosophy of science, and—in broad terms—liberalism. American Jewish philosophy takes off from a position of strength quite alien to the German-Jewish experience. American Jewish philosophers are no longer eager but frustrated outsiders, kept at bay by the mandarins of the old universities; they are themselves leading professors at leading universities. Nor are American Jews, their worries about their own demographic prospects notwithstanding, in doubt about their Americanness—and nor, equally importantly, are other Americans. No one questions whether Jews are “real Americans” in the sense that Germans, and the Jews themselves, questioned the validity of their *Deutschtum*. As such, Jewish philosophers today are writing as insiders vis-à-vis the American cultural establishment, believing themselves to be responsible for the moral and spiritual well-being of American society. A leading distinction between the current wave of Jewish philosophical work in the United States and the earlier wave in Germany, as Leora Batnitzky details below, is that German Jewish philosophy contained Judaism within the category of religion, whereas American Jewish philosophy is uninhibited in seeking the political implications of Judaic commitment. This is the stance of the native and the citizen. The liberal ideals and institutions of the American republic are not incidental to the deepest concerns and commitments of American Jewish philosophers.

Before turning to factors within the American Jewish community that might account for the upsurge of Jewish philosophy, let us consider some trends in American philosophy as a whole. Had logical positivism and other science-oriented analytic approaches carried the day in American philosophical circles, a culturally specific and embedded mode of philosophizing such as Jewish philosophy would have had no ground to secure even a toehold. Quine’s remark, that two kinds of people go into philosophy—those interested in the history of philosophy and

those interested in philosophy—speaks volumes about a certain scientific conception of philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Such a view, even if not anchored in logical positivism, is as disdainful of the history of philosophy as positivism was. It removes philosophy from culture and is embarrassed by the location of departments of philosophy in humanities (rather than natural science and mathematics) faculties. Philosophy of science is philosophy enough, Quine famously said. The language of morals, politics, law, and art was no longer thought to have cognitive content. Evaluative terms expressed nothing more than the preferences and desires of those who used them. Had such an arid view of the domain of philosophy prevailed, as it seemed to for a time in mid-century America, Jewish philosophy would be an oxymoron.

But this situation was not to last, due both to developments within analytic philosophy as such and to shakeups at the margins. Rawls' 1971 *Theory of Justice* shook moral philosophy from its meta-ethical slumbers and encouraged a new attention to the philosophical defense of liberal ideals and institutions, as well as to normative ethics. The renewal of normative ethics in turn found a new field of endeavor in modern medicine. "Applied ethics" in the biomedical domain became increasingly prevalent, overcoming the isolation of philosophy from public affairs for the first time since Dewey. Kuhn's 1962 *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* showed that philosophy, in this case philosophy of science, could not neglect the history of science. The book had an immense impact and helped to restore the importance of the history of philosophy for American philosophers. Kuhn's epistemological thesis underscored the role of the history of ideas in setting the *Fragestellung* or paradigm, as he put it, that constrained the interpretation of data. There were no basic, given, consensual data outside of the interpretations that we have of them. Science is in some measure a hermeneutic enterprise. Thus, philosophical reflection on the cultural space in which the work of interpretation goes on reacquired legitimacy. This whole development was strengthened, as well, by ordinary language philosophy and, perhaps more significantly, by feminist philosophy. All of these trends pluralized American philosophy, made it more sensitive to

<sup>7</sup> Nehamas, "Trends in Recent American Philosophy," 230.

historic cultures and languages, and expanded its conception of what was worth hearing, reading and reflecting upon.

At the same time that philosophy became more open to an ever-expanding “philosophy of . . .” approach, the Jewish community went through a “paradigm shift” of its own. Observers of American Jewish life have noted that for much of the post-war period, the organized Jewish community directed most of its energies to helping Jews abroad. The Six-Day War of 1967 brought a new urgency to work on behalf of the State of Israel. The awakening of the Jews of the USSR in the aftermath of that conflict drew American Jewry into intensive work on behalf of Soviet Jews. Domestically, a liberal emphasis on social justice, coordinated with the civil rights movement, made a kind of progressive utopianism the practical faith of American Jews. Jewish learning, religious commitment and practice, Hebrew literacy, and other traditional indicia of the Jewish way of life were scanted by the Jewish mainstream. A change of tack began to occur in the early 1990s. The end of the USSR, an apparent peace initiative between Israel and the Palestinians, and frightening demographic projections based on an intermarriage rate of almost 50%, occasioned a reorientation. The organized Jewish community faced the salutary task of having to decide what Jewish life should really be about in the United States. Many of its activities, despite their value, began to look like surrogates for a serious encounter with the perennial imperatives of Judaism. Rising to the occasion, the Jewish community during the last decade and a half laid more emphasis on Jewish education, endogamy, and religious discovery and renewal than ever before.

The renaissance of Jewish philosophy in America may be seen as a parallel development. It is an ongoing endeavor to evoke and reflect on first principles, on what is really fundamental to Judaism, and to gauge the significance of those fundamentals in light of contemporary moral, epistemological, metaphysical, and political theories. It is to do so, furthermore, in a self-consciously American context, with reference to theoretical discussion in the American academy. But beyond the purely theoretical, American Jewish philosophy joins the larger civic conversation about the interrelation of religion—religious thought, practice, faith-founded moral communities and their values—with public life in our pluralistic, liberal democracy. And it joins specifically Jewish conversations—both the proximate one about the meaning of Jewish life

in America and the perennial one among philosophers and other Jewish thinkers across the ages.

In the essays collected in Part I of this volume, eight American Jewish philosophers reflect on the meaning of their own work, as well as on how their work relates to contemporary American philosophical and moral concerns. All of the essays provide a window on what counts as Jewish philosophy for these thinkers, what they think the most important issues and the most fruitful ways of pursuing them are, and how their projects relate to broad civic or public concerns. Some of the pieces are more autobiographical in tone than others. All of the authors were asked to give the reader an orientation in their own thought and then to reflect on such questions as, What role has the American context—broadly construed—played in your thought? How have American ideals and realities, American philosophy and politics, influenced your work? To what extent has your intellectual agenda been shaped by the social and cultural context (including the contemporary American university) in which you live and work? These questions provided a common agenda for the essays.

Leora Batnitzky establishes an intellectual context for American Jewish philosophy. Batnitzky's task was to compare American Jewish work with its immediate twentieth-century forbear, German Jewish philosophy. Batnitzky argues, as mentioned above, that American Jewish philosophy allows for a richer, more political or theo-political conception of Judaism than was possible for German Jews, who lived in a society where Judaism was forced into the narrow framework of a Protestant *manqué* confession. The political dimension of American Jewish thought, which Batnitzky postulates as its distinguishing feature, is apparent, to greater or lesser degrees, in the chapters that follow.

Lenn E. Goodman discusses some of the distinctive themes of his work: opposition to dogmatizing, a religious naturalism deeply nurtured by natural science, and a critical reappropriation of tradition. He sketches a faithful, intellectual, but non-dogmatic or superstitious Judaism, fully engaged in the contemporary metaphysical and moral conversation. Goodman argues for a theory of value that is ontological, that is, which responds to value in being as such. He brings Jewish thought into a critical exchange with modern conventionalism, emotivism, pragmatism, and other anti-realist philosophical traditions. Conscious of the profound impact that American ideals have had on his views, Goodman



is eloquent in articulating his debt to American intellectual and public culture.

Steven Kepnes exemplifies the use of a tradition that Goodman rejects, American pragmatism. Kepnes represents a con-temporary trend in American Jewish philosophy known as “textual reasoning.” Thinkers of this orientation draw on hermeneutics and the philosophy of language to allow for a new openness to the “logic of scripture.” Kepnes argues for the engagement with texts as a redemptive practice. It redeems the practitioner by opening up new moral possibilities as well as new epistemic ones. Furthermore, the engagement in liturgical practices can be shown to be deeply meaningful and transformative for individuals and communities insofar as meaning, on the familiar pragmatist account, inheres in use. Kepnes shifts the emphasis of thought from analysis and explanation to experience and practice, claiming that such a reconstruction affords new possibilities for engaging old problems such as theodicy, a problem made more urgent by the Holocaust.

The Holocaust also orients the philosophy of Michael Morgan. In his essay Morgan wrestles with the problem of historicity, that is, with the claim that truth is in some way dependent on its historical-cultural setting, rather than transcending history and being available, platonically as it were, in the same manner in different epochs. Morgan comes to this problem from engagement with the meaning of the Holocaust, specifically whether the historical reality of the Holocaust renders the Judaism of the past incoherent. Do Judaism and its claims to truth transcend history, or must Judaism be immersed in the historical process such that whatever Judaism is at any given point is a function of what historically-embedded Jews say it is? Is there objectivity and, if so, what are the grounds of its authority? This leads Morgan to look at how human agents, persons responsible for interpreting such abstractions as Judaism or for acting in a moral manner, are construed. His work overcomes atomistic accounts of the self and embeds agency in a public realm of shared, authoritative meanings. Although the problem of historicity became acute in nineteenth-century Continental thought, it resonates in America, which as the first “new nation” has a problematic relationship with its own past.

In his contribution David Novak sets out to distinguish Jewish philosophy, or philosophical theology, from the Jewish non-philosophical theology, found in the classical rabbinic corpus, and Jewish anti-philoso-

phical theology, found in the mystical and kabbalistic traditions. Novak is concerned with characterizing Jewish philosophy as a discourse which is open to all who share in rational thought but which speaks with normative authority only to Jews. He gives special attention to the American context of Jewish rationalism and its normative authority: Jewish philosophy must be involved in a dialogue over moral and political principles with American thought, but must resist, at the same time, reduction to American contents and categories. The ontological and axiological priority of Judaism for the Jew—a strong theme in Novak's work—must be preserved. Novak explores Judaism's resemblance to and difference from the social contract tradition of liberalism.

Norbert Samuelson reengages the mode of medieval Jewish philosophical engagement with science. For him, contemporary Jewish philosophy must also be done in dialogue with science. Samuelson articulates a scripturally informed Jewish philosophical understanding of creation that he defends as a reasonable belief. He also cuts a path between traditional views and skepticism on the question of revelation. Each of these approaches is based on a sophisticated methodological reflection on what truth can plausibly mean in different linguistic contexts. Having written books on creation and revelation, he discusses as well his study of redemption. This leads him into questions of utopia and politics; into what is achievable by human effort in a Jewish view, and how such aims relate to modern western political aspiration. Finally, Samuelson relates his philosophical work to the American context in which he is active.

Kenneth Seeskin also engages medieval thought, in his case Maimonides, to argue in favor of negative theology and to define the ethical and anthropological consequences of that philosophical theology. Seeskin develops a biblical and rabbinic account of consent, which is, in liberal social theory, a crucial condition for authority. The Bible is set on a trajectory wherein the agency and dignity of every person is a final good. There is a conjunction of values, on the deepest level, between the Bible's transcendent underwriting of human dignity and the American ideal of responsible liberty. Although Seeskin is explicitly indebted to Maimonides and Kant, the framework that he develops is close to that of the early Puritans and other Reformed, covenant-oriented Protestants. The contribution of the Bible to the founding of America echoes once again in Seeskin's work.

Martin Yaffe exemplifies the practice of doing philosophy through literary commentary. Yaffe, whose intellectual horizon is animated by Leo Strauss through his teacher (and Strauss's student) Harry Jaffa, discusses his work on Job, *The Merchant of Venice*, and Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*. As a philosophical commentator, Yaffe is concerned to explore how the constitutive tension between Jerusalem and Athens—between the Bible and Jewish thought and philosophy—plays out in the civic framework of Western and American modernity. How are claims to revealed truth, including the rival claims of Judaism and Christianity, related to the basis of civil authority, of the philosophical foundations that make shared citizenship possible? Yaffe's deepest question, which other contributors in their own ways share, is whether the civic culture of the United States can be sustained without biblical faith.

Part I concludes with two responses to the entire project. The first is from the political theorist William Galston. Galston locates the work of these American Jewish philosophers in the context of American political thought and contemporary civic concerns. The second response, from the intellectual historian Paul Mendes-Flohr, brings this section back to where it began: are we, indeed, in the midst of a renaissance of Jewish philosophy, or does Mendes-Flohr's earlier dire assessment of the Jewish intellectual situation remain intact?

# COMING AFTER: AMERICAN JEWISH THOUGHT IN LIGHT OF GERMAN JUDAISM

Leora BATNITZKY

The task that I have set for myself in this essay is creating a prelude to the chapters that will come. I would like to outline briefly what American Jewish philosophy looks like when viewed from the perspective of German-Jewish thought. This is important for at least two reasons, the first institutional, the second philosophical.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, German Jewry was only a fraction of the size of Eastern European Jewry. That is, there were at most 800,000 German Jews, compared to five million Eastern European Jews. At the same time, German Jews lived for the most part only in Germany and in small outposts in America. In contrast, Eastern European Jews not only lived in Eastern Europe but also constituted most of the Jewish communities throughout the British Empire, Palestine, the United States, France, and even Germany. Yet despite the relatively small size of the German-Jewish community as well as its relatively minor geographic prevalence, the study of German Judaism has dominated the academic study of Judaism in general.

The reasons for this are many, but perhaps the central reason is that what we call today Jewish studies programs are the direct heirs of German-Jewish efforts at creating the enterprise of modern Jewish scholarship, what they called *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (or science of Judaism), which has rightfully taken its place alongside other humanistic disciplines in the secular academy. From an institutional point of view, any attempt at constructing an academic field of Jewish philosophy by necessity takes place against the backdrop of the history of Jewish studies, which even today has a decidedly German orientation. The philosophical point follows from this institutional point: if German-Jewish thought is the backdrop against which American Jewish philosophy constructs itself, where does

American Jewish philosophy differ from German-Jewish thought, and why does it differ as it does?

In what follows, I will attempt to offer a simple yet important answer to this question. My suggestion is that German-Jewish philosophers are united by one important factor, which is the attempt to define Judaism as a religion. This is the case, I will argue, not only for the liberal philosophy of the father of German-Jewish thought, Moses Mendelssohn, but also for the last great German-Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, who attempted to turn away from German-Jewish apologetics toward what he argued was a more authentic Jewish point of view. From Mendelssohn onward, German-Jewish philosophers strained to define Judaism in terms of a religion. This meant that German-Jewish philosophers could not talk constructively about politics, or perhaps better put, when German-Jewish philosophers did talk about politics they did so only in the context of maintaining that Judaism *as Judaism* and Jews *as Jews* had nothing to do with or to say about politics. In contrast, as I will argue in the conclusion of my paper, a defining feature of the renaissance of Jewish philosophy in America is the ability and need to reflect precisely on politics from the perspective of Judaism.

Before turning specifically to Mendelssohn and Rosenzweig, I would like to first make two important qualifications to the argument that follows. First, my criticism of the intellectual results of German-Jewish philosophy is in no way meant to anachronistically and unfairly delegitimize the German-Jewish philosophical enterprise in light of the fate of German (and indeed European) Jewry. Instead, I would like to consider the structure of German-Jewish philosophy on its own terms in order to focus on the profound conundrum in which German-Jewish thought, from Mendelssohn to Rosenzweig, continued to find itself.

This leads to my second, perhaps more important, qualification. The story that I am about to tell about German-Jewish thought is in many ways oversimplified. While, as I will argue, German-Jewish thinkers continued to define Judaism as a religion, they often did so in ways that were at odds with their own descriptions of Judaism as well as in tension with the objectives of their own arguments. I will be able to point to some of this internal tension briefly only with regard to Mendelssohn's philosophy, but it is a tension that is also present in the other thinkers I will mention, and especially Hermann Cohen, who will not be discussed in this essay. It is

the creatively contradictory nature of much of the German-Jewish attempt to fit Judaism into the category of religion while denying that Judaism has any particular political authority that has made a philosophical retrieval of German-Jewish philosophy possible in contemporary American-Jewish philosophy. And this retrieval has played a not inconsiderable part in the renaissance of Jewish philosophy in America. My point, then, is not to present an absolute dichotomy between German-Jewish philosophy and American-Jewish philosophy, but rather to show how the renaissance of Jewish philosophy in America works itself out in large part through a rejection of a problem set in motion by, but also recognized by, German-Jewish philosophers.

To begin to make this argument, it is helpful to take a clue from an important German Jewish émigré to the United States, Leo Strauss. As he put it,

The weakness of liberal democracy in Germany explains why the situation of the indigenous Jews was more precarious in Germany than in any other Western country. Liberal democracy had originally defined itself in theologico-political treatises as the opposite, not of the more or less enlightened despotism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but of 'the kingdom of darkness,' i.e. of medieval society. According to liberal democracy, the bond of society is universal human morality, whereas religion (positive religion) is a private affair.

Strauss's comment comes from the preface to the 1965 English translation of Spinoza's *Critique of Religion*. And Spinoza is of course quite relevant not only to the history of the development of theories of liberal democracy but also to the particular quagmire that German-Jewish thought, beginning with Mendelssohn, found itself in.

Arguing that the Hebrew prophets were "private men" with conflicting perceptions of reality resulting from their overactive imaginations, Spinoza maintained that while everyone is entitled to their religious opinions, religious opinions without reference to philosophical truth or morality cannot by definition lay claim to truth, philosophically or politically. More particularly with regard to Judaism, Spinoza famously contended that the laws of the Hebrews are pertinent only in the context of their original, political meaning: "ceremonial observances...formed no part of the Divine law, and had nothing to do with blessedness and virtue,

but had reference only to the elections of the Hebrews, that is...to their temporal bodily happiness and the tranquility of their kingdom, and... therefore they were only valid while that kingdom lasted.” Because the ceremonial law no longer corresponds to a political kingdom, Spinoza’s argument concludes that Jewish law is not divine law, and that post-biblical Jewish law is meaningless.

Beginning with Moses Mendelssohn, German-Jewish philosophers accepted Spinoza’s framework for thinking about politics and philosophy even when they attempted to reject his conclusions. Mendelssohn followed Spinoza in maintaining that the ceremonial law makes no claims on philosophy or politics, but unlike Spinoza he denied that the meaning of the Jewish ceremonial law was political. As Mendelssohn put it in his public defense of Judaism in his *Jerusalem*: “Judaism boasts no exclusive revelation of eternal truths. . . . The voice which let itself be heard on Sinai on that great day did not proclaim, ‘I am the Eternal, your God, the necessary, independent being, omnipotent and omniscient, that recompenses men in a future life according to their deeds.’ This is the universal religion of mankind, not Judaism.” In contrast to the universal religion of mankind, which Mendelssohn equates with morality, Judaism, he contends, is a historical temporal truth that makes demands only on the Jewish people and not on society and morality at large. In making a distinction between the universal religion of mankind and Judaism, Mendelssohn anticipates another major tenet of German-Jewish liberalism. Here again Strauss offers us a helpful description when he suggests that German-Jewish thinkers embraced a “distinction between state and society, or . . . the recognition of the private sphere protected by the law but impervious to the law, with the understanding that, above all, religion as particular religion belongs to the private sphere.” Mendelssohn distinguishes between the laws of the state, which by definition demand adherence, and those of the realm of Jewish society, which by definition make no such demands.

But this distinction, both in the context of *Jerusalem* and in the context of Judaism more broadly, is particularly ironic and telling. After all, in defending Judaism to his Christian critics, Mendelssohn claims in *Jerusalem* that “Judaism knows of no revealed religion in the sense in which Christians understand this term. The Israelites possess a divine legislation— laws, commandments, ordinances, rules of life, instruction in the will of

God as to how they should conduct themselves in order to attain temporal and eternal felicity.” On the one hand, Mendelssohn claims that Judaism is not a religion because it demands action, not belief (this is where it differs from Christianity). But on the other hand, Mendelssohn defines Jewish law in completely apolitical terms, placing it precisely in contrast to the laws of the state. As he puts it: “[Judaism] as religion knows of no punishment, no other penalty, than the one the remorseful sinner voluntarily imposes on himself. It knows of no coercion, uses only the staff [called] gentleness, and affects only mind and heart.”

Very fundamentally, Mendelssohn’s definition and description of Judaism is at odds with itself. Judaism is not a religion in the way that his Lutheran interlocutors understand religion, that is, in terms of faith, because Judaism is a religion of law and action. Furthermore, Mendelssohn maintains, Jewish law is not a deadening legalism as some Protestant caricatures would have it, but a “living script.” For these reasons, Mendelssohn would seem to reject the liberal definition of religion offered by his younger contemporary, Friedrich Schleiermacher, who argued that “Religion’s essence is neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling.” For Mendelssohn, the revealed legislation of Judaism, as opposed to Schleiermacher’s liberal faith, is oriented toward both thinking and acting. In Mendelssohn’s words, “Among all the prescriptions and ordinances of the Mosaic law, there is not a single one which says: You shall believe or not believe. They all say: You shall do or not do. . . . The ceremonial law itself is a kind of living script, rousing the mind and heart, full of meaning, never ceasing to inspire contemplation and to provide the occasion and opportunity for oral instruction.” Yet along with this rejection of the boundaries placed on the concept of religion by Protestants during the Enlightenment, Mendelssohn also removes any conflict between Judaism and universal truth (what he calls the universal religion of mankind), and also any conflict between Judaism and the state, by claiming in both cases that any conflict that would seem to arise is the result of a category error. Judaism is distinct from, and not a threat to, universal truth, just as Judaism—and indeed Jewish law—is distinct from, and not a threat to, state law. From a formal perspective, then, if not from the perspective of content, Mendelssohn’s definition of Judaism does very much fit with Schleiermacher’s liberal Protestant definition. As Schleiermacher puts it, “Religion maintains its own sphere and its own character only by completely



removing itself from the sphere and character of speculation as well as from that of praxis.”

Mendelssohn wants to have it both ways: Judaism is a religion of law requiring action and stimulating contemplation. Yet when it comes to questions of universal action, that is, state law, and when it comes to universal contemplation, that is, the eternal truths of philosophy, Judaism remains separate and irrelevant. To apply Schleiermacher’s words to Mendelssohn, we could say that for Mendelssohn, “Jewish law maintains its own sphere and its own character only by completely removing itself from the sphere and character of universal speculation as well as from that of universal praxis.”

It is, of course, important to underscore that the motivation for Mendelssohn’s argument is both obvious and honorable. He is compelled to defend Judaism or risk being forced to convert to Christianity, and yet avoid offending his enlightened Christian audience. And given that when he wrote *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn, and the Jewish community for whom he speaks, had no civil rights whatsoever, the caution that he was forced to use in writing it cannot be overstated. Nevertheless, the tension between Mendelssohn’s claim that Jewish law demands contemplation and action and his claim that Jewish law is in essence dispensable to the pursuit of universal truth and morality bears itself out also in the subsequent fate of Mendelssohn’s philosophy. On the one hand, Mendelssohn provides a very traditional conception of the Jewish obligation to obey Jewish law. As he puts it, “He who is not born into the law need not bind himself to the law; but he who is born into the law must live according to the law; and die according to the law.” Yet on the other hand, Mendelssohn provides no philosophical or theological justification for why Jews should obey the law and in fact, by virtue of his own definitions, he *cannot* provide any philosophical or theological justification for Jews to obey the law, because he has argued that Jewish law is a temporal, historical truth whose legitimacy is dispensable to philosophical truth and theological belief.

When the liberal society that Mendelssohn had hoped for was, at least to some extent, finally actualized, the question of why Jews should remain Jews was one they continually asked themselves. From Mendelssohn’s time forward, this question would be answered within his framework, which denied, as we have seen, that Judaism qua Judaism has anything to say about politics.

The birth of Reform Judaism was of course predicated on precisely the claim that Judaism does not constitute a separate political authority. Abraham Geiger, Reform Judaism's founding father, maintained that the study of Judaism can only be a history of "spiritual achievements" because "it is precisely to its independence from political status that Judaism owes its survival." Geiger in fact linked his non-political view of Judaism with a commitment to the German national cause: "The Germans were able to give birth to the greatest discoveries . . . to the free spirit of the Reformation and to the glory of a literature of world-wide import. It is our wish that the new united *Reich*, led by its imperial dynasty, may be able to record similar achievements." Geiger's notion of the spiritual achievement of Judaism went hand in hand with his attempt to rid the Judaism of his day of any notion of collective politics or messianic hope. Geiger rightly recognized that from the perspectives of Judaism and Jewish history only the existence of a synagogue state could undermine the German state. His claims about Judaism's "spiritual achievement" bear directly on his affirmation of the possibility of German political liberalism—defined as the privatization of religious faith within a neutral political order—for Jews and Germans alike.

It is worth noting that even Modern Orthodoxy, founded by Samson Raphael Hirsch, followed the framework set by Mendelssohn, which separated Jewish life from political life at large. Significantly, this was the case even when Hirsch criticized the Reform movement for its claim that Judaism is a religion. Hirsch argued that

Judaism is not a religion, the synagogue is not a church, and the Rabbi is not a priest. Judaism is not a mere adjunct to life: it comprises all of life. To be a Jew is not a mere part, it is the sum total of our task in life. To be a Jew in the synagogue and the kitchen, in the field and the warehouse, in the office and the pulpit, as father and mother, as servant and master, as man and as citizen, with one's thought, in word and in deed, in enjoyment and privation, with the needle and the graving-tool, with the pen and the chisel—that is what it means to be a Jew. An entire life supported by the Divine idea and lived and brought to fulfillment according to divine will.

Yet despite these assertions, Hirsch nonetheless maintained that

"It is certainly possible for us to attach ourselves to the state, wherever we may find ourselves, without harm to the spirit of Judaism. After

all, our former independent statehood did not represent the essence or the purpose of Israel's national existence but merely a means to the fulfillment of its spiritual task. . . . It is precisely the purely spiritual nature of Israel's nationhood that makes it possible for Jews everywhere to tie themselves fully to the various states in which they live. . . ."

Franz Rosenzweig is the German-Jewish philosopher who perhaps did most to try to move beyond Mendelssohn's framework. As Rosenzweig remarked, "From Mendelssohn on, our entire people has subjected itself to the torture of this embarrassing questioning; the Jewishness of every individual has squirmed on the needle point of a 'why.'" Rosenzweig's efforts at Jewish education were aimed at ridding the German Jew of the need to answer the question "why." Like Hirsch, Rosenzweig contended that Jewish life is not a piece among many pieces of a Jew's identity, but rather that being Jewish encompasses what he called "the whole" of a Jew's existence. As Rosenzweig put it, "It is necessary for him [the German Jew] to free himself from those stupid claims that would impose Juda 'ism' on him as a canon of a definite, circumscribed "Jewish duties" (vulgar orthodoxy), or "Jewish tasks" (vulgar Zionism), or—God forbid—"Jewish ideas" (vulgar liberalism). If he [the German Jew] has prepared himself quite simply to have everything that happens to him, inwardly and outwardly, happen to him in a Jewish way—his vocation, his nationality, his marriage, and even, if that has to be, his Juda'ism—then he may be certain that with the simple assumption of that infinite "pledge" he will become in reality "wholly Jew" (*'ganz Jude'*)."

But even Rosenzweig was unable to transcend Mendelssohn's paradigm. While Rosenzweig rejected his German-Jewish predecessors' confining of Judaism to the private realm, and while he, like Hirsch, explicitly rejected the category "religion," Rosenzweig nevertheless remained unable to consider the ways in which Judaism *as Judaism* or Jews *as Jews* might have an impact on political life. Indeed, rather than insisting that Jewish wholeness requires a particularly Jewish involvement in politics (whatever that might mean), Rosenzweig in fact insisted far more than his predecessors had that Judaism qua Judaism was completely separate from politics. As Rosenzweig put it to his friend Eugen Rosenstock: "Is not part of the price that the Synagogue must pay for the blessing...of being already in the Father's presence, that she must wear the bandages of unconsciousness

over her eyes?” As Rosenzweig argues at length in part three of *The Star of Redemption*, the bandages of unconsciousness blind the Jew particularly to politics.

Schleiermacher’s modern definition of religion is again pertinent: “Religion maintains its own sphere and its own character only by completely removing itself from the sphere and character of speculation as well as from that of praxis.” Rosenzweig’s understanding of Judaism fits this description, because his claim is precisely that “Judaism maintains its own sphere and its own character only by completely removing itself from” the political life of the world around it. Like Mendelssohn, Rosenzweig finds himself in the position of describing and defending Judaism and particularly Jewish law as, to use Mendelssohn’s terms, a living script encompassing and guiding the whole of life for individual Jews and the Jewish community. Yet also like Mendelssohn, Rosenzweig simultaneously feels compelled to limit this living script when it comes to modern political life.

While the American context has certainly seen repetitions of this German-Jewish paradigm, particularly in the ideologies of the institutional inheritors of German-Jewish thought, the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox movements, much of the renaissance of Jewish philosophy in America is, I would argue, founded on a rethinking of this very position, often through a retrieval and working out of some of the productive tensions within German-Jewish thought. (In fact, the work of the editor of this section, Alan Mittleman, and of two other contributors, David Novak and Kenneth Seeskin, exemplify this retrieval of German-Jewish philosophy and movement beyond it in an American context.) There are no doubt many reasons for this shift among American Jewish philosophers who feel comfortable discussing and even obliged to talk about a particularly Jewish contribution to American political life. At least two obvious reasons come to mind: the first is the complicated interplay between religion and political life that has marked the United States since its founding, and the second is the dominance of the descendants of Eastern European Jews in the United States, who had very different conceptions of Judaism than their German Jewish counterparts had.

But I leave discussion of these issues to others in order to focus instead in the remainder of this chapter on an unlikely pair of American Jewish thinkers, both émigrés, who rejected precisely the German-Jewish paradigm that I have described here. It is my suggestion that it has been

the subsequent drawing out of the implications of their very different philosophies that has provided the seeds for the renaissance of Jewish philosophy in America. These two thinkers are Leo Strauss and Mordecai Kaplan, and they are important both for their deep if surprising similarities and for their profound and ultimate differences. Together they represent the possibility of a real and important engagement between Jewish philosophy and American politics. At the same time, together they also represent the ways in which the implications of this engagement are by no means obvious or determined in advance.

I have already mentioned Strauss and his criticism of German-Jewish thought and its faith in the divide between universal human morality and the private affairs of Jewish religion. As is well known, Strauss called this divide “the theologico-political predicament,” by which he meant, among other things, the tension between the modern Jewish claim that religion is a private matter and the theological-political context that defined pre-modern Judaism, in which the relationship between God and the people of Israel is mediated by law. Mendelssohn’s strained attempt to defend the necessity and centrality of Jewish law for the Jewish people while denying that the law has any political or philosophical implications embodies precisely this tension. As I tried to show before, the strained dynamic set in motion by Mendelssohn plays itself out not only in liberal Jewish philosophy in the German-Jewish context but also in the invention of German-Jewish Orthodoxy, as well as in Franz Rosenzweig’s arguably neo-Orthodox philosophy.

Remarkably, in his 1934 magnum opus, *Judaism as a Civilization*, Kaplan anticipates Strauss’s 1965 analysis of the Jewish theologico-political predicament and applies it to the modern ideological movements of Judaism, which of course originated in Germany. As he put it in regard to Reform Judaism: “Only in Wonderland can there be a cat which leaves its grin behind it. In the world of reality it is not feasible to try to have the grin without the cat. That experiment has been undertaken by Reformism in trying to have the Jewish religion without the living entity to which that religion belongs—without a living, functioning Jewish people.” And as he put it in regard to Modern Orthodoxy, “What, in short, is this law of God which no longer regulates our workaday life, and which, outside of marriage and divorce laws, functions only in matters which least affect social relationships and the adjustment of conflicting interests.”

Kaplan concluded his analysis of the state of contemporary Jewish life by arguing that “Paradoxical as it may sound, the spiritual regeneration of the Jewish people demands that religion cease to be its sole preoccupation.” His proposed solution was to view Judaism not merely as a religion but as a civilization that embraces all avenues of life, including land, language, literature, mores, laws, and folk ways. But viewing Judaism as a civilization was not just a matter of adding spheres of life to the sphere of religion. Instead, argued Kaplan, the Jewish religion must also rid itself of certain elements. Most famously, of course, Kaplan contended that a rethinking if not disavowal of a supernatural conception of God and any notion of Jewish chosenness was required. As he put it, “The modern man who is used to thinking in terms of humanity as a whole can no longer reconcile himself to the notion of any people, or body of believers, constituting a type of society which may be described as belonging to a supernatural order. This is essentially what the doctrine of ‘election’ has hitherto implied.”

It is here of course that the differences between Strauss and Kaplan arise. While the starting points for both of their thoughts was the rejection of the German-Jewish paradigm and the demand for honest and sober recognition of the break with the Jewish past that modernity brings, their evaluations of modernity for Judaism as well as modernity itself could not be more distinct. Ironically, it is Strauss the non-believer who emerges as the defender of the ultimate value of Jewish revelation as it has been classically understood. As he puts it in what could seem a direct criticism of Kaplan’s position: “I believe, by simply replacing God by the creative genius of the Jewish people, one gives away, one deprives oneself—even if one does not believe—of a source of human understanding. . . . Now I do not wish to minimize folk dances, Hebrew speaking, and many other things—I do not want to minimize them. But I believe that they cannot possibly take the place of what is most profound in our tradition.” What is most profound, for Strauss, in the Jewish tradition, is a belief in a transcendent God who has revealed, and continues to reveal, Himself to the Jewish people by way of the Torah.

Strauss, of course, unlike Kaplan, provided no proposed solution to the theologico-political predicament. But for Strauss this is exactly the point: there is no solution. However, it is in recognizing the irresolvable problem of Judaism’s relation to the modern world that Strauss sees the relevance of Judaism and indeed of Jewish chosenness for modern political

life. As he put it, “Finite, relative problems can be solved; infinite, absolute problems cannot be solved. In other words, human beings will never create a society which is free from contradictions. From every point of view it looks as if the Jewish people were the chosen people, at least in the sense that the Jewish problem is the most manifest symbol of the human problem insofar as it is a social or political problem.”

For Kaplan, the Jewish problem is not an absolute problem, and neither are there absolute human problems. American society, in fact, provided for Kaplan the very possibility for the simultaneous resolution of Jewish and human problems. In his words, “[the American Jew] must be willing to live up to a program that spells nothing less than a maximum of Jewishness. True to his historic tradition he should throw in his lot with all movements to further social justice and universal peace, and bring to bear upon them the inspiration of his history and religion.” For Strauss, in contrast, America offered the possibility, and only the possibility, of a society and political order that would not demand or even strive for the resolution of the Jewish problem in particular and of human problems in general.

In conclusion, as the pairing of Strauss and Kaplan shows, the practical, political implications of a Jewish philosophical involvement with American politics remain uncertain, and rightfully so. But taken together, Strauss and Kaplan do suggest a perhaps counterintuitive point about the engagement between modern Jewish philosophy and democratic politics. As they transform if not reject their German-Jewish predecessors, Strauss and Kaplan, despite their profound differences, agree that Judaism may thrive in a democratic society in which politics is the site of legitimate disagreement. So too, as the case of Germany shows, Judaism may fail to thrive in a society that demands consensus so much as to deny any political disagreement.

The promise of America for both Kaplan and Strauss holds the possibility of an affirmation of Jewish difference, but the meaning of Jewish difference remains unresolved for both, for perhaps opposite reasons. Kaplan famously argues for the necessity of Jewish difference, for what he called the hyphenated cultural allegiance of the citizen of modern state. As he put it, “for a long time to come citizenship in the western world will take the form of hyphenism. . . . Far from viewing the hyphenated cultural allegiance of the citizen of a modern state with alarm, we should rejoice that

there is present in the body politic an influence counteracting the danger of chauvinism.” Yet doesn’t Kaplan’s claim that Judaism is countercultural rest on the very disagreement that he wants to resolve? And if Kaplan does do away with the deep sources of Jewish disagreement with the prevailing culture, as exemplified by the doctrine of election, isn’t Kaplan back to where Mendelssohn started?

But while Kaplan may over-emphasize political agreement, Strauss may over-emphasize disagreement. Where are the common sources of political agreement, for Strauss? If “the Jewish problem is the most manifest symbol of the human problem insofar as it is a social or political problem,” on what basis should or can Jews become good, democratic citizens? Surely Jews can align themselves with democratic politics because, unlike other political orders, democracy leaves them alone, but for what reason can or should Jews actually acquire democratic virtues?

Attempting to answer these twin challenges left by Kaplan and Strauss has provided the seeds for the blossoming of Jewish philosophy in America.



# DOING JEWISH PHILOSOPHY IN AMERICA

*Lenn E. GOODMAN*

Our brief, as I understand it, is to explicate the impact of America on our own philosophical work. Three areas come immediately to mind:

(1) America is a free and liberal society. I treasure that freedom and love the country that makes it possible. In practical terms that love translates into support of America's security and well being, a sense of fellowship with other Americans, and admiration for the institutions and ideals that make America a nation—for this nation is defined not by race or even language, but in part by history, situation, and destiny, and more fully by ideas and by our own ability and commitment to put those ideas into practice. My love for America does not bring with it a very un-Jewish failure to criticize. But it does render me chary of knee-jerk criticism, clichés of protest, and the rhetoric of alienation. America is mine, and I am not a stranger here.

The liberal foundations of American culture and political thought resonate in my work in Jewish philosophy, in my deep repugnance for dogma. I celebrate the biblical and rabbinic traditions of Judaism for their rejection of dogmatism. Beyond that, my American roots call on me, as a Jewish philosopher, to pursue adequate ways of conciliating the claims of community and tradition with those of law and justice, seeking a wholesome middle ground between the extremes of identity politics and atomistic anomie, impersonality, secularism, formalism, and legalism.

My mother, Florence Goodman, saw to it that I learned to know and love my people, the people of Israel, and to cherish the values and ideas of Judaism. But she was a feminist, an idealist, and a poet long before the memory of her grandmother's love and her own hopes for my sister and me brought our family back to Jewish commitment and observance. My mother taught English literature at one of the Los Angeles city colleges, and along with her classic opportunity feminism, I share her love of poetry and song, the plastic arts, and the riches of the English language.