



A GERMAN JEWISH YOUTH

When Leo Strauss died in 1973, he did not leave an autobiography, and a scholarly biography on this major political philosopher has as yet to be written.¹ But Strauss left us with a number of autobiographic fragments, and what else we need to know in order to approach the writings assembled in this volume is easy enough to ascertain.²

Strauss was born 20 September 1899, to an Orthodox Jewish family living in the rural town of Kirchhain (Hesse), just ten kilometers northeast of the university town of Marburg. He shared this rural rather than urban background with the majority of German Jewry; in fact, he shared it with most Germans of the time. Strauss grew up, as he once described it, in an atmosphere of strict observance yet with “very little Jewish knowledge.”³ Influenced by the typical humanistic *Gymnasium* education of his day, he “formed the plan, or the wish, to spend [his] life reading Plato and breeding rabbits while earning [his] livelihood as a rural postmaster.” He describes the estrangement from his Orthodox home as a gradual and nonrebellious movement that culminated in his “conversion,” at the age of seventeen, “to simple, straightforward political Zionism.” The group he joined was the Jüdischer Wanderbund Blau-Weiss.⁴

While the history of Blau-Weiss as an independent organization was relatively short-lived, it exerted a significant influence on the German Zionist youth movement as a whole.⁵ A group by this name was first constituted in Breslau in 1907, as a Jewish counterpart to the influential German Wandervogel. The Wandervogel movement had existed since the 1890s when a group of youngsters came together in Steglitz under the leadership of Karl

Fischer.⁶ What united these youths was their contempt for modernity, for urban civilization, and for the materialism of adult society. The early Wandervogel was inspired by the Teutonic mysticism of Friedrich Ludwig Jahn,⁷ Paul de Lagarde,⁸ and Julius Langbehn,⁹ and its majority espoused a more or less de-Christianized Lutheran spirituality. Only a minority embraced the neopaganism of the Far Right or the radical utopianism of the Far Left. Clad in short pants and open-neck shirts, such bands of “perpetual adolescents”¹⁰ would hike through the German countryside, singing folk songs and debating the inspired poetry and social criticism of the day (such as the writings of Stefan George, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Hermann Hesse). Although the youngsters were not committed to any party or any ideology, they were unanimous in the assumption that Jews could not well or sincerely be part of their movement.¹¹ Lagarde and other favorite authors associated the Jews with the urban materialism so viscerally rejected by this new generation, and it seemed doubtful to them that Germans and Jews could share the real inner communion and feeling of commonality that was the hallmark of this movement. Most constituents of the Wandervogel considered themselves “a-Semitic” rather than anti-Semitic, regarding the alienness between the two nationalities as a fact of nature and life. The nonchalance by which they were excluded from this German *völkisch* renewal precipitated a quest among young Jews to experience the irrational grounds of commonality among their own. To them the most appropriate and dignified answer to this experience of exclusion presented itself in a German-Jewish Zionist youth movement.¹²

Blau-Weiss established itself as an alternative to the German youth movement, and it modeled itself on its ideals and practices.¹³ Its rhetoric was a form of heightened speech that, in hindsight, may appear quaint and makes all analysis of its content rather difficult.¹⁴ The membership consisted of high-school-age children and university students (i.e., ages fifteen to twenty)¹⁵ who acted without adult supervision¹⁶ and who rejected anything on principle that smacked of politics and political organization. Countering the Protestant Germanism of the Wandervogel with a corresponding “German Jewish” orientation, Blau-Weiss provided a haven for the assimilated and alienated Jewish youths who enjoyed the sense of belonging provided by the uniforms and pins and who thrived on the ritual of marching through the streets, returning the German “Heil!” with a self-assured Jewish “Shalom!”¹⁷ Hiking across the German countryside was a novel expression of Jewish communal life, and it was perceived as such. The Wanderbund provided “instant movement and action . . . in the course of which they hoped to achieve their human and Jewish substance.”¹⁸ Like its German counterpart, Blau-Weiss was decidedly middle-class¹⁹ and hence recruited more successfully among those who were

like themselves, that is, among assimilated Western Jews, and much less successfully among the Eastern European Jewish proletarians who were more strongly attracted by the socialist *haluts* movement (which, of course, also had its German counterpart in the socialist Arbeiterjugend). As in the case of their German peers who, at the 1913 Hohe Meissner meeting, called for “inner truthfulness” as the hallmark of their *völkisch* renewal,²⁰ the enthusiastic rhetoric of Blau-Weiss often covered up for a pervasive lack of concrete content. In the case of Blau-Weiss with its highly educated, liberal, and assimilated constituency, this meant most often a pervasive lack of Jewish knowledge. Affiliation with a Zionist youth organization meant for many to find a place where they could study Jewish history (from a Zionist perspective) and Hebrew for the first time in their lives.

In contrast to the *haluts* movement and the association of Zionist fraternities—the Kartell jüdischer Verbindungen, or K.J.V.—the Wanderbund Blau-Weiss was initially rather lukewarm when it came to the question of settling in Palestine.²¹ This changed under the post-World War I leadership of Walter Moses (1922–26), who completely reorganized Blau-Weiss, briefly united it with K.J.V., and managed to establish a German-speaking settlement in Palestine.²² When this experiment collapsed, however, the Wanderbund was dissolved (1926), a setback that affected the entire German Zionist youth movement.²³

Leo Strauss had first joined Blau-Weiss with the enthusiasm of a convert to a movement whose very purpose was the encounter (*Erlebnis*) of a deep commonality between its members. Yet this enthusiasm gave way to a “spirit of sobriety.” In his very first Zionist essay, “Response to Frankfurt’s ‘Word of Principle’” (1923), Strauss admits to his earlier “confusion” in a phrase that echoes Nietzsche’s confession of having temporarily been afflicted with the disease of anti-Semitism.²⁴

It was thought that by heaping upon us for years, to the point of nausea, “personal encounters” [*Erlebnisse*] and “confessions” [*Bekennnisse*] one could make us forget that there is such a thing as critique. *We ourselves were temporarily confused*, but now we unambiguously profess the spirit of sobriety as opposed to that of pathetic declamation. “Belief” may still be decisive, yet belief is no oracle but is subject to the control of historical reasoning. (See below, p. 66. Emphasis added.)

By invoking the “spirit of sobriety as opposed to that of pathetic declamation,” Strauss distanced himself not only from his earlier self but also from a new Blau-Weiss, whose covenant had been issued in 1922 by Walter Moses

in Prunn. While he was certainly not alone in criticizing Blau-Weiss, he was not ready to accept the alternatives proposed by other, no less vocal critics. Instead, he performed a careful dance of distinctions in which he distanced himself from virtually all contemporary trends. Strauss's very first intervention was thus characterized by a keen ear for false rhetoric and by an insistence on arguments that can be defended with the force of "intellectual probity."²⁵ Strauss, the Zionist, was after all—a philosopher.

As Strauss honed his literary skills as a Zionist writer, he also informally continued the philosophical studies that he had formally concluded in 1921 with his dissertation on the problem of knowledge in the work of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819). In the curriculum vitae that was part of the "extract" from his dissertation, Strauss indicates that, after having completed his secondary education at the humanistic Gymnasium Philippinum in Marburg (1912–17), he had served in the German army for seventeen months before returning to Marburg as a student of "philosophy, mathematics, and the sciences." In the typical fashion of the time, Strauss had then attended four universities in only four years before graduating with a doctorate from the newly founded University of Hamburg. Aside from the convenient proximity to his hometown, what had initially attracted Strauss to Marburg was the reputation of Hermann Cohen (1842–1918), founder of the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism, spiritual leader of German Judaism, and a profound inspiration to aspiring Jewish philosophers. Strauss never personally met Hermann Cohen who, after moving to Berlin in 1912, no longer taught in Marburg on a regular basis. By the time Strauss returned from the war, Cohen had passed away.²⁶ The decision to continue his studies under Ernst Cassirer, who was then still in Berlin, may also have been inspired by Strauss's regard for the work of Cohen. Cassirer (1874–1945) had been Cohen's master student, the stellar representative of the younger generation of neo-Kantians; his appointment to a full professorship was delayed by a governmental policy of discrimination that, despite legal emancipation, prevailed throughout the Wilhelminian era. Jews were prevented from taking higher positions in the military, in the court system, in the administration of the state, and other key areas, such as the discipline of philosophy proper (in contrast to disciplines that then also fell under the heading of philosophy, such as mathematics and the sciences). Hermann Cohen had been the notable exception to this rule. After the demise of the Second Reich, Cassirer finally received a call, and Strauss followed him from Berlin to Hamburg.

Initially quite loyal to Cassirer, Strauss nevertheless found no congenial mind in the philosopher of "symbolic forms." The content of the dissertation indicates that his agenda was sharply at odds with that of his advisor. While

the title and research question of Strauss's dissertation superficially conform to Cassirer's interest in the "problem of knowledge,"²⁷ the substance of the work describes and, more importantly, defends Jacobi's philosophy as a counterposition to the methodological rationalism of the Kantian tradition maintained by Cassirer. When he wrote his dissertation, Strauss was influenced by a different group of thinkers. Among the theorists of religion and philosophers Strauss acknowledges in his dissertation are Ernst Troeltsch, Max Weber,²⁸ Max Scheler, and Rudolf Otto. The methodology of "description" that Strauss applies to Jacobi's concept of "belief" (*Glaube*) is the methodology of the phenomenological school of Edmund Husserl. Yet this affiliation alone would not have pressured Strauss into opposing Cassirer.

What is most striking about the dissertation is its celebration of "belief" at the expense of critical reason. In light of this fact, the above-cited "confusion" with respect to "belief" from which Strauss had recovered by 1923 emerges as a pervasive condition that involved not only his political but also his philosophical views. Be that as it may, in 1923 we see Strauss defending the values of critique and argument against belief and enthusiasm. One might say that the philosophical career of Strauss began only after he had completed (and rejected) his philosophical dissertation. Hence it is not surprising to see Strauss, now a young doctor of philosophy and freelance Zionist writer, continue his studies, first in Freiburg, and then back in Marburg. Strauss went to Freiburg to hear Edmund Husserl, the founder of the phenomenological school, but instead he came under the influence of Martin Heidegger, whom he henceforth regarded as the most important philosophical voice of his time.²⁹ He followed Heidegger back to Marburg, where he befriended the new crop of students of philosophy, among them most prominently Hans Georg Gadamer and Karl Löwith.³⁰

Despite his newfound "spirit of sobriety," Strauss's distance from Cassirer prevails unabatedly and becomes explicit in "The Argument with European Science" (1924). Yet his critique of Cassirer does not entail a distancing from Hermann Cohen. Rather, Strauss distinguishes between the thoroughly idealist presuppositions of Cassirer's work on religion, which he continues to reject, and the presupposition in the philosophical work of Hermann Cohen of a concept of religion that is rooted in the religion of the Hebrew prophets. According to Strauss, the flaw of Cassirer's concept of religion derives from the assumption that what we call religion is located on a developmental continuum with the mythological phase of the cultural consciousness.³¹ In contrast, Cohen's concept of religion derived from the assumption that the transcendent God of the Hebrew prophets cannot be understood on the basis of a continuous development but only on the basis of a radical rejection of its

mythological predecessors.³² Following Cohen, Strauss asserts against Rudolf Otto that the religion of the Hebrew prophets is no less rational for being “uncanny.” Rather (and this is what, according to Strauss, Cohen was after), the rational core and the resistance to myth of the biblical prophets could be understood only if they were recognized as mutually constitutive aspects of a profoundly rational religion. In this way, Cassirer is distanced from Cohen, who himself, as Strauss saw it, had always maintained a critical distance from many of the views held by the other representatives of the Marburg school.³³

It was this aspiring philosopher who raised his voice among other sophisticated young Zionists. What kind of a Zionist was this philosopher? Was he lukewarm about making converts for the movement, as one anecdote seems to suggest,³⁴ or was he an engaged and productive *alter Herr* (as postgraduate members of students’ corporations were called)? The latter is supported by the fact that, in 1924, Strauss was invited by the board of the K.J.V. to give a keynote lecture at a retreat, which he defended against a critic in the 1925 “Comment on Weinberg’s Critique.” Here Strauss also mentions his repeated participation in recruitment events (in the language of the students: *Keilerfahrt*).³⁵ Furthermore, the lecture manuscripts recently published by Heinrich and Wiebke Meier show that the Zionist student organization continued to provide him with an audience for his ever more theoretical ruminations on the modern predicament.

Strauss’s highly academic and intellectualist Zionism is not unrepresentative for the German Zionist youth movement of the early 1920s, but it seems somewhat out of step with the general developments in the second half of the 1920s and the early 1930s.³⁶ This may explain why Strauss’s participation in the Zionist debates declined after 1925. While he made a transition from Blau-Weiss to K.J.V., the latter was not an ideal venue for the discussions on the theoretical matters Strauss was most interested in, such as the relation between Judaism and European culture, religion and Zionism, and so on. While these topics could still be debated, the student organization was primarily interested in practical questions, such as recruitment, ideological education, and preparation for immigration to Palestine. Given its very moderate recruitment successes, K.J.V. also showed increasing interest in the new “science” of propaganda.³⁷ In the second half of the 1920s, the few attempts at theoretical debates were eclipsed by the practical concerns of the movement: German Zionist settlements in Palestine, Jewish-Arab relations, and, last but not least, the deteriorating political, social, and economic situation in Germany. There is no trace in Strauss’s lectures and essays of interest in these practical questions.

In terms of its social and economic ideals, the Zionist movement was a

microcosm of the political world of the 1920s, which was divided between the proponents of socialist and capitalist blueprints for the future of society. In addition, beginning in 1929, the representative parliamentary democratic aspects of the Weimar constitution began to lose out to its more popular presidential aspects. While Strauss does not speak to the socioeconomic question of the time directly, his affinity with the revisionism of Jabotinsky (see below) may put him in the camp of the supporters of a capitalist economy in Palestine, while his 1932 review of Carl Schmitt's essay "Concept of the Political" may put him in the camp of the foes of political pluralism.³⁸ Yet, trying to judge the politics of the philosopher, one must keep in mind that his political Zionism was of a "formal" rather than practical nature, a tendency very much in the tradition of the youth movement that he had originally joined and that, in a sense, he never outgrew. The intellectualist bent of Strauss's Zionism is documented in the following anecdote in which he recalls an exchange he had with the Zionist leader, man of letters, and founder of the Jewish Legion, Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880–1940),³⁹ whom he met on several occasions.⁴⁰

I was myself . . . a political Zionist in my youth, and was a member of a Zionist student organization. In this capacity, I occasionally met Jabotinsky, the leader of the Revisionists. He asked me, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well, we read the Bible, we study Jewish history, Zionist theory, and of course, we keep abreast of developments, and so on." He replied, "And rifle practice?" And I had to say, "No."⁴¹

In sum, the very absence in the early essays of any acute political content and their ultramoralistic concern for a truthful statement of principles makes these writings typical of the middle-class intellectualism of the German Zionist youth movement of early 1920s. The early publications and lectures place Strauss squarely in the society of the German-Jewish cultural renaissance of the 1920s,⁴² which was widely sustained by university students and graduates, their informal circles, and their organizations. Within this renaissance culture, Strauss is most closely associated with the Frankfurt circle of young intellectuals against whom he polemicizes in his very first essay.⁴³ This circle included the future educator and cofounder of *Brith Shalom*, Ernst Simon, the sociologist Leo Löwenthal (who, like Simon and his friend Gerhard Scholem, came from a highly assimilated background), and the psychologist and later Trotskyite Erich Fromm.⁴⁴ Fromm and Löwenthal were connected with the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research. The members of this circle also had in common that they were admirers of the Frankfurt rabbi Nehemia

Nobel, himself an *Alter Herr honoris causa* of K.J.V., and that they all lectured at various times at the Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus founded by Franz Rosenzweig, as did Leo Strauss.⁴⁵

Strauss's early writings appeared in some of the most important organs of the Jewish culture of renewal, namely in *Der Jude*,⁴⁶ in *Die jüdische Rundschau*,⁴⁷ and in *Der jüdische Student*.⁴⁸ As a Zionist and a *Bundesbruder* (member of the brotherhood of Zionist students), he articulated what he saw as the shortcomings of political, cultural, and religious Zionism. By articulating his concerns as forcefully and honestly as he did, Strauss followed the maxim of the 1913 Hohe Meissner assembly of the German Wandervogel, the demand of "inner truthfulness."

Strauss returned to his philosophical pursuits more formally in February 1925, when he accepted a fellowship from the Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. Its academic director, Julius Guttmann, had read Strauss's essay "Cohen's Analysis of Spinoza's Bible Science" (1924) and encouraged Strauss to pursue his research on Spinoza further. Over the course of the next three years, Strauss wrote his first monograph, in which he examined not only the "Bible science" (*Bibelwissenschaft*) of Spinoza and his predecessors, as mandated by his fellowship, but Spinoza's critique of religion, a shift in topic that caused a rift between Strauss and Guttmann. The Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums had been initiated in 1917 by Franz Rosenzweig and Hermann Cohen⁴⁹ with the aim of stimulating a culture of study that was to bridge the gap between the academy and the Jewish community. For this purpose, the fellow was to combine his or her⁵⁰ research and writing with a period of residence and teaching in a provincial Jewish community. Strauss's agreement with Rosenzweig's innovative approach to Jewish adult education⁵¹ may be evident from the fact that he not only accepted the Akademie's funding that allowed him to pursue his research but also took on the pedagogical responsibility that came with the fellowship, spending time as a scholar-and-lecturer-in-residence in Kassel. As far as we know, he was the only fellow to do so.⁵² On the other hand, Strauss's radical intellectual curiosity and the independence of his philosophical mind seem to have put him at odds with an academy that, at the time, may have been guided more by apologetic than by scholarly concerns.⁵³ After completing *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, whose publication was delayed because of the previously mentioned disagreement with Guttmann, Strauss went on to produce a number of introductions to volumes 2 and 3, pt. 1, of Mendelssohn's philosophical and aesthetic writings, published by the Akademie in 1931 and 1932 as part of its jubilee edition of the collected writings of Moses Mendelssohn.⁵⁴ Strauss's association with the Akademie lasted until 1931, when, after twelve years of operation, it

encountered financial difficulties that forced it to dismiss its employees. Among those dismissed was Leo Strauss.⁵⁵

While writing on Mendelssohn, Strauss was working on Thomas Hobbes as well as on the political philosophy of the medieval Jewish and Muslim traditions. On the strength of his studies of Hobbes, Ernst Cassirer, Carl Schmitt, and Julius Guttmann⁵⁶ recommended Strauss to the Rockefeller Foundation, which provided him with a grant allowing him to pursue his studies, first in Paris (from October 1932 until December 1933), and then in London (1934).⁵⁷ Unemployed and with his fellowship due to run out by October 1934, Strauss—by now in effect an expatriate on the move—searched for academic employment outside of Germany. He repeatedly turned to Carl Schmitt, asking him for letters of introduction to contacts in France and the United States. Schmitt, however, who by then had thrown in his lot with the National Socialists, no longer answered Strauss's letters.⁵⁸ At the same time, Strauss pursued a position in Jewish philosophy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In order to boost his candidacy, Strauss combined several essays on Maimonides and medieval philosophy into one volume, published by Schocken Verlag in Berlin under the title *Philosophie und Gesetz*.⁵⁹ None of these attempts came to fruition, and it was not until 1938, when he relocated to the United States, that Strauss was able to put an end to this period of itinerancy that affected not only himself but also his immediate family. The career of the American political philosopher began at the New School for Social Research in New York.⁶⁰

In the United States, Strauss went on to become a widely read, highly respected, and deeply influential author and teacher. Among the major works he came to produce are *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon's Hiero* (1948), *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952), *Natural Right and History* (1953), *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958), *What is Political Philosophy?* (1959), *The City and Man* (1964), *Socrates and Aristophanes* (1966), *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (1968), *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse* (1970), *Xenophon's Socrates* (1972), *The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws* (1975), and *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (1983), to name just those mentioned by Hilail Gildin in his *Introduction to Political Philosophy*.⁶¹

Strauss's own reminiscences suggest that his career as a political scientist began about at the time when the political Zionist fell silent—at a time, that is, when Strauss returned, by way of Maimonides, to the love of his high school years, Plato. Whether this reorientation constituted a change of mind or merely a privileging of the theoretical work Strauss had been pursuing all along, even under the guise of a rather "formal" political Zionism, cannot be decided without a further look at the early writings.

"CHANGE IN ORIENTATION"

The earliest text included in this volume is an extract from the 1921 philosophical dissertation on Jacobi. The latest one is a piece from 1932, published on the occasion of a Spinoza jubilee, in which Strauss bids a Zionist farewell to the author of the *Theological-Political Treatise* without, as a philosopher, taking leave of the philosopher Spinoza.⁶²

The entire collection of early writings allows us to take a closer look at the "young Jew born and raised in Germany" whom Strauss describes in the preface to the English edition of his *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, adding that, at the time, he found himself "in the grips of the theologico-political predicament."⁶³ The later texts included in this edition provide us with material from a time when Strauss began to articulate the means by which to extricate himself from this very "theological-political predicament." At that point, the predicament in question was widened into one that concerned not just the German Jew but modern man in general. Yet it was also one that no one perceived as clearly and as unsettlingly as did the German Jew.

In the preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, which "comes as close to an autobiography as is possible within the limits of propriety,"⁶⁴ Strauss speaks of a "change in orientation which found its first expression"⁶⁵ in the critical review of a book by the German political philosopher Carl Schmitt entitled *The Concept of the Political* (1932).⁶⁶

The essay to which Strauss refers as containing "the first expression" of his "change in orientation,"⁶⁷ then, is a review of the work of another author. This characteristic would not by itself make the essay exceptional among Strauss's writings. From early on and throughout his career, Strauss's writings are reviews of the writings of others. With the exception perhaps of his dissertation (which he later called "a disgraceful performance"),⁶⁸ even his earliest essays show him not only as an attentive reader who is interested in tracing the thought of others to its (usually either unadmitted or unconscious) ultimate presuppositions but also as a thinker preoccupied with the relation between reading and writing. One of the maxims, formulated in 1931, in which Strauss articulates the means by which we are to extricate ourselves from the crisis of modernity, is "learning through reading" (*lesendes Lernen*). Strauss recommends a conscious and vigorous return to the "old tome," or to the "old books," that must again be opened. This recommendation is first expressed in—a book review ("Review of Julius Ebbinghaus, *On the Progress of Metaphysics*"). Strauss taught others how to read more carefully by examining the reading habits of the great authors for clues as to the way in which they constructed their own texts.⁶⁹

Strauss's predilection for the form of the review is not an indication of modesty, if by modesty one understands a kind of softness that in the world of letters may arise from the realization that, given the historical relativity of all knowledge, no point of view can be superior to any other point of view. The very opposite is the case with Strauss. The modesty he praises is the rather immodest modesty of Socrates who, when entering the marketplace to inquire into the pursuits of his fellow Athenians, did so with the perplexing knowledge of an ignorance that was surpassed only by the ignorance of those who failed to realize their ignorance. Strauss learned from Socrates and Plato about the "natural difficulties" of philosophizing that the moderns must first relearn, since modern ignorance is more profound than the ignorance addressed by Socrates and Plato. But it was from Maimonides that Strauss learned in what respect and due to what event our modern, artificial ignorance surpasses that of the Platonic cave dwellers. This realization is first expressed in an unpublished lecture draft, written in 1930.⁷⁰

In our search for indications of a "change of orientation" we have been moving backward from the date given by Strauss himself, 1932, to 1930. This should not come as a surprise. Strauss must evidently not be taken too literally when he cites his review of Carl Schmitt as the first expression of a change in orientation that led him beyond the position of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. In 1962, when Strauss wrote the preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, it was merely the most widely accessible place to which Strauss could point in order to make sure his American readers would not take it as a binding or valid statement of his current views. It seems more accurate to speak of a series of discoveries that precipitated, "changes in orientation"—perhaps not just one but several—or perhaps a change in stages.

Based on Strauss's own understanding, which of course is echoed in the literature on this matter, the writings before us may therefore be divided into those written before the "change in orientation" (up until the completion of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* in 1928), and those that point to this change in orientation. Yet what surfaces in the published writings is insufficient to explain the nature and extent of the reorientation Strauss was undergoing in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The very fact that Strauss left several rather important lectures and manuscripts unpublished at the time may indicate that he was no longer certain that what he had to say benefited the Zionist audience to which he had immediate access. Similarly, it is highly unlikely that Strauss would have published *Philosophy and Law* in the form he did had it not been for the pressure on him to come forward with a Judaic publication that would make him a plausible candidate for a position in medieval Jewish philosophy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In fact, one does not need to be a

trained psychologist to see how Strauss's ambivalence about his own candidacy may have induced him to add a last-minute introduction to his more or less traditional interpretations of Maimonides in which he adumbrates a position that was inevitably misunderstood. Whether one mistook him for a *hozer bit'shuvah* (someone who reverts to Orthodoxy) or an atheist—both interpretations were as likely as they were inaccurate (as will be shown more broadly below)—neither of these readings would have endeared him to those making the decision on his candidacy.

If we are not mistaken, the basic observation that emerges from the early writings may be described as follows. Strauss identifies with neither one of the extreme, absolute, and diametrically opposed positions that he diagnoses as the prevailing forces of the time. He is neither Left nor Right, but wishes to reach beyond—that is, “before”—the division between Left and Right. By the same token, he is neither Orthodox nor atheist, but seeks to reach beyond—that is, “before”—the division between Orthodoxy and atheism. He pushes the prevailing positions to the extremes of their fundamental, irrational motives and assumptions, and points out the irrational first assumptions of seemingly rational positions (a method already present in his dissertation and even more so in his early work on Spinoza). Conversely, he argues that there are rational implications to the seemingly irrational *mysterium* of the transcendent God of prophetic religion that cannot be captured even using Rudolf Otto's assumptions about the historical development of perceptions of the sacred. The last word of the early writings invokes the maxim engraved on Spinoza's signet ring, *caute*, which Strauss renders as a call for “independence” (*Unabhängigkeit*).⁷¹

These concerns are present throughout the early Zionist and philosophical-historical writings. With these concerns, Strauss finds himself in the company not just of the fellow Zionists he addresses, nor just of Jews, but also of his philosophical friends and contemporaries. It is typical for the atmosphere of the time that what seems a parochial and limited Jewish venue (after all, was not Zionism all about overcoming the humanism of the reform generation, and about a return to cultural inwardness?) is in fact a highly public and hybrid enterprise where all kinds of young intellectuals find one another through the deeper, ultimately universal issues, even though these issues may be articulated in terms of irreconcilable differences. The seemingly straightforward political movement of Zionism served Strauss and others as a forum for the discussion of profound matters of political, religious, and philosophical orientation. Thus the sophisticated readers and fellow authors of *Der Jude* understood Strauss quite well when he wrote about the end of *galut* (exile)

and the inextricable indebtedness of modern Jews to European “content”; about traditional religion, the Enlightenment critique of religion, and the pseudoreligion of an atheistic theology; about the problem of the rationality of transcendence; about typologies of thought (Max Weber); about the atheism of modern biblical theology; about the inverted affinities between Zionism and anti-Semitism (Paul de Lagarde); and always about Spinoza. The thread running through all the early writings is the attempt to determine, from history, one’s place in history. Yet it became increasingly clear to Strauss that the effort of deriving a philosophically (“scientifically”) sound imperative from historical existence was ill conceived. At a time when political theologies began, not only in theory but also increasingly in practice, to displace the culture of argument and critique, Strauss turned away from the present altogether. The great urgency with which his later political philosophy is invested bears the mark of the hour of its birth.

When, in 1935, Strauss described a “Jew who cannot be orthodox and who must consider purely political Zionism, the only ‘solution to the Jewish question’ possible on the basis of atheism, as a resolution that is indeed highly honorable, but not in earnest and in the long run, adequate,”⁷² it seemed to many that he was describing himself. But surely one could not be an atheist and an Orthodox believer at the same time! Could there be a synthesis of revealed religion and modern historical consciousness? Strauss’s answer is: No. But there should be such a synthesis! Strauss’s answer is: such a synthesis can only exist at the expense of the truth of religious belief. It would be atheism in disguise. Can one not be a Jew in the full sense, just by virtue of seeking the well-being of the Jewish nation? Strauss: but is not nationalism a modern European rather than a truly Jewish value? So what is a Jew to do? In the statement cited above, Strauss formally ends his association with the Zionist movement, and he does so at the very moment when the Jewish state had become a matter of greater urgency than ever before.⁷³ But he also formally acknowledges that he can no longer be Orthodox. What is left for him to choose? This is the point at which Strauss turns to Maimonides, to his Muslim predecessors, and to Platonic political philosophy.

In order to get a sense of the relation between the various writings from the early period and the overall agenda of Strauss’s thought that may have been in the making at the time, we need to return, for a moment, to the figure of a “change in orientation,” mentioned in the autobiographic preface to *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*. Strauss dates it—not too precisely as we saw above—as taking place around 1932. What is he referring to, and what do students of Strauss mean when they refer, in this context, to a “turn” (Meier)⁷⁴

or a “return” (Green)⁷⁵ to Maimonides that is variably dated as having occurred around 1932, or between 1928 and 1932, or even as beginning in earnest only in 1936?

Some caution may be advised when it comes to the interpretation not only of the date but also of the rhetorical figure of a “turn” itself. German intellectual history of the interwar period and German Jewish intellectual history of the same period are all too replete with “turns,” “returns,” and other forms of conversion to be comfortable with this cluster of metaphors when used to describe the intellectual biographies of what seems an entire generation of converts. Martin Heidegger, whom Strauss heard first in Freiburg and later in Marburg and whom he greatly admired (although only up to a point), is perhaps the most famous case of a philosopher who encountered a turnaround (*Kehre*). The word *Kehre* scarcely hides the religious underpinnings of this trope: *Kehre* is short for *Umkehr*, that is, repentance. Of course, in Heidegger’s context the reference is more immediately to movements of the sort Plato expects the dwellers of his cave to undertake. Yet again, the religious underpinnings of the metaphor are such that the whole thing may be suspected of an unclear mixture, an internalized “Jerusalem” encroaching on an “Athens.” If so, to speak of *Kehre* accomplishes the very obfuscation of difference that Strauss sets out to overcome from early on.

There are other pertinent cases. The key date in the hagiography of Franz Rosenzweig, whom Strauss knew and admired no less than he knew and admired Heidegger,⁷⁶ is a turn from the baptismal font that inaugurated and determined the direction of his return to Judaism. Similarly, Hermann Cohen was likewise credited (not accidentally by Rosenzweig) with having experienced a “return to Judaism” that is supposed (by Rosenzweig) to have occurred in his old age. To be sure, these are only superficial remarks on a single rhetorical figure that enjoyed a certain currency in Strauss’s youth, and that he seems not to have been beyond applying to himself. Of course, the phrase of a “change of orientation” that Strauss uses to describe what occurred after the completion of his book on Spinoza may simply mean that Strauss turned “backward” in history, doing what was generally considered the impossible by “returning” to pre-Enlightenment thought, more precisely by seeking in a renewed study of ancient Greek and medieval Jewish and Muslim sources a way out of the modern predicament, that is, out of the “theologico-political predicament.”

What this means for the present volume is the following. As much as one may be convinced of the descriptive value of metaphors such as “turning” and “returning,” these metaphors clearly put greater emphasis on what is being turned to than on what prepares the ground for such turning. The

metaphor makes the latter appear as a mere precondition, usually a negative precondition, a “no-thing,” as it were, that precedes the real thing. But we should not judge before the fact, and in any case it is a good thing to distrust overused characterizations such as the metaphor of a “turn.”

To be sure, convenient generalizations are not easily disposed of, nor are they without utility. As just noted, the figure of a turn is characteristic of early-twentieth-century Continental discourse, and Strauss shares it with many of his contemporaries. This observation may not indicate much about the substance of the philosophical moves that are characterized by it. Yet it articulates a common concern of the younger generation of the time. This generation consisted of those who had seen their peers perish in the merciless trenches of the First World War, a war that had been waged in the name of culture, civilization, and progress, and that had turned culture, civilization, and progress into doubtful propositions. War, revolution, economic hardships, and a foundering democracy made it impossible for the younger generation to naïvely subscribe to the wisdom of their elders, a wisdom that had turned out to be folly. Thus, at least, we may account for the eagerness of that generation to articulate radical solutions to problems that were not only of a theoretical nature but were eminently political. Suspicious of liberalism and humanism, and nauseated by the sanctimonious cultivation of vast theoretical solutions to concrete practical problems, they sought to break out of the ivory tower and participate in life. Some of the philosophers of the time, such as Margarete Sussmann, spoke of an “exodus out of philosophy.”⁷⁷ A response to the situation generated by the First World War that was commensurate with it had to entail a clear “turn” away from the values, ideas, notions, systems, and so on, that had sustained the ill-conceived notions that had led to the war itself.

Strauss himself was fully aware of this mood and deeply suspicious of its allure. While he was sympathetic to this kind of analysis, he felt that such shared sympathy does not prove the legitimacy of a standpoint.⁷⁸

Around 1929, Strauss realized that the true problem consists in the expectation that any answer directed only at the present could claim validity or necessity.⁷⁹ Strauss’s earliest Zionist writings still assume that historical reasoning will provide the right answer to the problems of the time. In the writings dating from 1929 and onward, however, Strauss articulates the insight that the *proton pseudos* resides precisely in this presupposition. He realizes that the quest for the right position in history raises more questions than it answers. What begins as the Jewish quest for historical orientation in a new situation (“How are the people to live now?”) turns into the question of whether it is possible to recover the timeless problem of the right life.⁸⁰

POLITICAL EXISTENCE AND RELIGION

The early essays document Strauss's gradual shift from political Zionism to the eternal problem of the political itself, from the question, "How are the people to live now?"⁸¹ to the question: "How is one to live?"⁸² This reorientation does not necessarily constitute the displacement of one cause by another, yet it entails the expression of a resignation, of a loss of political faith. In the transition from one question to the other, however, concern with political existence prevails, especially with political existence in relation to religion. The relation between religion and politics—a central issue also in Strauss's early scholarly work—is no more fundamental to the Zionist writer than to the genealogist of political philosophy. While the phase of reorientation is characterized by a withdrawal from political participation for the sake of retrieving the classical political philosophy of the Platonic tradition, his earliest essays are permeated by the no less Platonic hope that Zionism might afford one of those rare moments when the philosopher might be king. To put it somewhat paradoxically, then: If there is a turn in the writings of the early Strauss, it is one from Plato to Plato.

In his 1923 "Response to Frankfurt's 'Word of Principle,'" Strauss positions himself firmly between all established ideologies, a strategy that was to remain one of the hallmarks of his authorship. While he defends the values of liberalism against the authoritarian trends of the new *Blau-Weiss*,⁸³ he also rejects the Frankfurt circle's demand for "Jewish content." While "Breslau" (i.e., the original, religious Zionist, pre-Walter Moses *Blau-Weiss*) may not yet have found its "word of principle," "Frankfurt" (the cultural Zionist circle including Ernst Simon, Leo Löwenthal, Erich Fromm, Fritz Goethein, and Erich Michaelis) was relying on surrogate stuff: it merely countered the new "pagan-fascist" rhetoric of Walter Moses with the rhetoric of "mystical-humanitarianism." Strauss diagnoses that both of these attempts at extricating oneself from modernity/Europe/Christendom were essentially indebted to modernity/Europe/Christendom in that they themselves were nothing but expressions of the modern self-consciousness. Antimodernism, he states, is itself profoundly modern and anything but a safe and certain return to Jewish "content." The essay is as sharp a critical analysis of early-1920s German Zionism as exists. Yet, unlike other critics of *Blau-Weiss* (e.g., Scholem), Strauss despairs of practical solutions to a theoretical problem, that is, he avoids suggesting action, practical work, and immigration to Palestine as solutions to what he regards as a theoretical problem.⁸⁴ Instead, he holds up the standard of "critique" and "historical reasoning" and thus opposes the Zionist

rhetoric of his time that privileges belief and affirmation over doubt and argumentation.

State and religion, and hence Zionism and the problem of Jewish “content,” are to Strauss two separate concerns, and the cultural Zionist attempt to mix the two seems to Strauss an ill-conceived undertaking. What is passed off as religion seems to Strauss to deny the fundamental doctrinal assumption of revealed religion—namely, the existence of God, understood as preceding all human concerns. Instead, what prevails is the modern humanistic theology of Martin Buber and others that, as he writes, had attained “canonical” status among many Zionists, and that Strauss diagnoses as incongruent with the dogmatic presuppositions of the Bible and of Jewish prayer.

Take, for example, Buber’s thoroughly immanentist interpretation of religion. If God is “later” than the religious experience [*Erlebnis*] of the individual or of the people (and this is Buber’s doctrine), then the trajectory toward absolutizing “the human” is already determined. (It is of lesser concern whether one thinks of the human more in terms of the heroic or of the Hasidic.) (“Response to Frankfurt’s ‘Word of Principle,’” p. 67)

Strauss asserts that it is this dogmatic presupposition of a humanistically reinterpreted religion rather than the values of argumentation and critique that he advocated that is to blame for the general “anarchy of standpoints” lamented by the Zionist leadership.

The Zionist pursuit of a state, on the other hand, seems to Strauss a sober and realistic expression of the normalization of the Jewish people, not—as in the period of assimilation—regarding individuals, but regarding the people as a whole. Overcoming the dream- or ghostlike existence in the exile (*galut*), Zionism has the mandate of accomplishing the Jews’ return to reality. Strauss speaks here, somewhat artificially, of *Einwirklichkeit*, that is, a kind of adaptive process aiming at overcoming the status of *Entwirklichkeit* that characterized the *galut*.

In order to develop the resolve that was needed for the Zionist pursuit of the state, the basic presupposition of *galut* had to be overcome. This presupposition is the Orthodox religious faith, and it was essentially overcome in the Enlightenment struggle against all fundamentalism. Among the Jews of the period of Enlightenment and emancipation, however, the space that was emptied of traditional faith was filled not with Jewish “content” but with German “content.” What Strauss’s intervention aims to point out above all is the futility of denying this. The atheistic faith that is rooted in the Enlightenment critique of religion must not be passed off as religion, and certainly not as identical with biblical religion.

Several further observations can be made on the basis of Strauss's first Zionist essay. While Strauss hints, in good liberal fashion, at the deep congruence between biblical religion and the modern state (as mediated by Spinoza), he clearly wishes to distinguish in no uncertain terms between modern humanistic theologies and religion in a pre-Enlightenment sense. Strauss describes as a kind of atheism the modern theological position that seeks a synthesis between biblical faith and modern humanism. Thus he writes in 1925 that

the atheism of present-day Bible science is evident. If it is not so evident that everyone can grasp it, this is due to the accidental fact that this science happens to be predominantly in the hands of professors of theology; that the inclination to react to "God," implanted in the human heart from time immemorial, cannot be uprooted overnight; that no atheist emerges unscathed from reading the Psalms and the prophets; mostly, however, that this science has its seat in Germany, the land of "reconciliations" [*Versöhnungen*] and "sublations" [*Aufhebungen*]. ("Biblical History and Science," p. 133)

Strauss continued to maintain the impossibility of reconciling traditional religion and the modern atheistic belief in the sufficiency of human reason.⁸⁵ Yet, in 1924 and 1925, the focus of his critique shifts from the "Left" to the "Right," a shift by which he aims to bring about what he believes is a long overdue realignment within the entire German Zionist movement.

In order to make my intention as clear as possible I shall proceed from its practical-political effect. I believe that the grouping of German Jewry into parties no longer corresponds to the spiritual situation of our generation. The alliance of Zionism and Orthodoxy will have to be replaced by the alliance of Zionism and liberalism. Today, the enemy is on the right! ("Comment on Weinberg's Critique," p. 118)

With greater involvement in the Zionist students' organization K.J.V., Strauss shifts his attention to a new enemy. Having settled the question of cultural Zionism to his satisfaction, Strauss turns to an issue that he regards as an even greater threat to the pursuit of a Jewish state, namely, the alignment between Zionism and Orthodoxy; Strauss attacks the religious Zionist organization Mizrahi. His thesis is that state and religion—that is, Jewish state and Jewish religion—cannot be aligned with one another. This is so because classical Jewish religion is fundamentally apolitical, whereas the modern state rests on self-determination and the dignity of man, values alien to traditional Judaism. Again, therefore, Strauss criticizes a contemporary movement, in this case the Orthodox religious Zionism of Mizrahi, for sailing under a false flag. What

Mizrachi aspires to cannot be justified on the basis of pre-Enlightenment religion, and since, in case of a conflict of interest, Mizrahi is more Orthodox than Zionist, the entire alliance can only be to the detriment of the project of a political movement based on self-determination and dignity. Strauss made this argument for the first time in a lecture to the members of the Kartell jüdischer Verbindungen assembled in the walled town of Forchtenberg in Hohenlohe. The board of directors of the K.J.V. had invited him to address the “burning issue” of Zionism and religion. On this occasion, Strauss was so much the spiritual leader of the entire assembly that he was even put in charge of speaking the commemorative words at the Herzl celebration concluding the retreat.⁸⁶

Oddly enough, some of his comments, of which we have only an indirect summary, invited the conclusion that Strauss was not only not on principle averse to a return to Orthodox faith, should that be possible, but that he himself enthusiastically embraced it. This, at least, is what his critic Hans Weinberg insinuates in his response to Strauss’s Forchtenberg lecture.

Concerning the *content* of the lecture, Strauß [*sic*] has only done half the job. He declares his intention to merely wish to show the dualism [*viz.*, of Zionism and religion] but to be incapable of resolving it; nevertheless he already makes a decision, and an emotional one at that, in favor of Orthodoxy. Here I simply do not understand Strauß. Either one regards nationalism and religion in most perfect harmony with one another, as one used to see it until now, or one recognizes the dualism, in which case it is, at least, premature—and it perhaps testifies to honest enthusiasm but certainly not to mental power—if one daringly leaps across such concerns and lands very comfortably at the desired result.⁸⁷

Strauss, of course, strongly rejects the insinuation of a thoughtless, emotional decision in favor of Orthodoxy.

I do not know how Weinberg comes to impute to me a decision in favor of orthodoxy, and to impute it to me, outrageously, as a decision “from honest enthusiasm.” I trust that the *Bundesbrüder* who heard my Forchtenberg presentation will agree with me when I conclude that there was no trace of “enthusiasm” to be found in it. As concerns my “decision for Orthodoxy,” this anticritique will not leave any remaining doubt and thus may serve as an example [of my true position]. However, if what I am being reproached for is my understanding that there are things in the Jewish tradition that are essential and obligatory for us, then I am being reproached for not being a perfect horse. (“Comment on Weinberg’s Critique,” p. 120)

The ambivalence toward religion in Strauss's Zionist presentations and writings may derive from his distinction between biblical religion, on the one hand, and its modern distortions, on the other, of which the Orthodoxy of Mizrahi is no less guilty than the Bible science of modern theologians. Neither cultural Zionism nor the religious Zionism of someone like Isaac Breuer⁸⁸ (see "Ecclesia militans") may claim to be in genuine agreement with biblical religion, or with religion in the pre-Enlightenment sense (cf. "Biblical History and Science"). The entire political rhetoric of Orthodoxy against secular Zionism is criticized as largely disingenuous, and the only basis on which Strauss (referring to "Zionism," but meaning himself) is ready to argue with Orthodoxy is the basis of the European critique of religion (see "On the Bible Science of Spinoza and his Precursors"). While political Zionism is defended against the discontents uttered by the cultural Zionism of the Frankfurt circle and the religious Zionism of Mizrahi, Strauss denies that the "deeper spheres of spiritual man"⁸⁹ can be fully satisfied by the political dimension of Zionism. Strauss is careful to distinguish between the spiritual trappings of nationalism, which he believes are not the issue, and the legitimacy of the political will of a people, as articulated by the political Zionism of Herzl. Nationalism, cultural or religious, may well fill the background left vacant by sober political Zionism, but it is hardly a genuinely Jewish sentiment, one congenial with the pre-Enlightenment sources of Judaism. Rather, it is Europe's parting gift to the Jews. The political will of the Jewish people leaves the "deeper spheres of spiritual man" empty; yet Strauss is far from ready to say how this void may be filled. Where he proposes a solution, it is—unsurprisingly—"rather negative."⁹⁰

While the 1925 Forchtenberg lecture gained Strauss the accusation of performing a leap of faith into Orthodoxy, his last Zionist publication—the 1928 review of Freud's *Future of an Illusion*—gained him the charge of being an atheist.⁹¹ The prominence that the refutation of Strauss's position received in volume 25 (1928) of *Der jüdische Student*⁹² may indicate a desire on the part of the Kartell jüdischer Verbindungen to mend the fences with the religious Zionists. Strauss's honest yet politically incorrect attack on an important ally in the Zionist struggle does not seem to have caused a permanent rift between himself and the leadership of K.J.V.; at least, he was invited on a further occasion to address one of its federal retreats.⁹³ Yet the strong rejection he experienced in connection with the Freud review may have triggered a number of important new considerations. First of all, it may not be coincidental that Strauss henceforth ceased to publish in the Zionist press.⁹⁴ It may indicate a growing skepticism on his part as to whether the intellectual was able to exert a direct and meaningful political influence.⁹⁵ And it may have