

Social Justice: Unique in Our Day? Two Perspectives --

Leo Strauss and Jill Jacobs

By the time German-born Leo Strauss (1899–1983) arrived in the United States in 1937, he had already established a reputation as a leading political philosopher and classicist. This reputation was ensured and enhanced throughout his years in the United States, most particularly during his twenty-five years at the University of Chicago. Among the most resonant aspects of his intellectual legacy are his critique of modern liberalism, his concept of “persecution and the art of writing,” and his hermeneutical approach to the reading of texts. His influence on American Jewish thought is enduring.

Leo Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens: Some Introductory Reflections,” *Commentary* (June 1967): 45–46, 55, 57.

Fifty years ago, in the middle of World War I, Hermann Cohen, the greatest representative of, and spokesman for, German Jewry, the most powerful figure among the German professors of philosophy of his time, stated his view on Jerusalem and Athens in a lecture entitled “The Social Ideal in Plato and the Prophets.” He repeated that lecture shortly before his death, and we may regard it as stating his final view on Jerusalem and Athens and therewith on *the* truth. For, as Cohen says right at the beginning, “Plato and the prophets are the two most important sources of modern culture.” Being concerned with “the social ideal,” he does not say a single word about Christianity in the whole lecture.

Cohen’s view may be restated as follows. *The* truth is the synthesis of the teachings of Plato and the prophets. What we owe to Plato is the insight that the truth is in the first place the truth of science but that science must be supplemented, overarched, by the idea of the good which to Cohen means, not God, but rational, scientific ethics. The ethical truth must not only be

compatible with the scientific truth; the ethical truth *needs* the scientific truth. The prophets are very much concerned with knowledge: with the knowledge of God. But this knowledge, as the prophets understood it, has no connection whatever with scientific knowledge; it is knowledge only in a metaphorical sense. It is perhaps with a view to this fact that Cohen speaks once of the divine Plato but never of the divine prophets. Why then can he not leave matters at Platonic philosophy? What is the fundamental defect of Platonic philosophy that is remedied by the prophets and only by the prophets? According to Plato, the cessation of evil requires the rule of the philosophers, of the men who possess the highest kind of human knowledge, i.e., of science in the broadest sense of the term. But this kind of knowledge like, to some extent, all scientific knowledge, is, according to Plato, the preserve of a small minority: of the men who possess a certain nature and certain gifts that most men lack. Plato presupposes that there is an unchangeable human nature and, as a consequence, a fundamental structure of the good human society which is unchangeable. This leads him to assert or to assume that there will be wars as long as there will be human beings, that there ought to be a class of warriors and that the class ought to be higher in rank and honor than the class of producers and exchangers. These defects in Plato's system are remedied by the prophets precisely because they lack the idea of science and hence the idea of nature, and therefore they can believe that men's conduct toward one another can undergo a change much more radical than any change ever dreamed of by Plato.

Cohen brought out very well the antagonism between Plato and the prophets. Nevertheless we cannot leave matters at his view of that antagonism. Cohen's thought belongs to the world preceding World War I, and accordingly reflects a greater faith in the power of modern Western culture to mold the fate of mankind than seems to be warranted now. The worst things experienced by Cohen were the Dreyfus scandal and the pogroms instigated by Tsarist Russia: he did not

experience Communist Russia and Hitler Germany. More disillusioned than he regarding modern culture, we wonder whether the two separate ingredients of modern culture, of the modern synthesis, are not more solid than the synthesis itself. Catastrophes and horrors of a magnitude hitherto unknown, which we have seen and through which we have lived, were better provided for, or made intelligible, by both Plato and the prophets than by the modern belief in progress. Since we are less certain than Cohen was that the modern synthesis is superior to its pre-modern ingredients, and since the two ingredients are in fundamental opposition to each other, we are ultimately confronted by a problem rather than by a solution. . . .

The fact that both Socrates and the prophets have a divine mission means, or at any rate implies, that both Socrates and the prophets are concerned with justice or righteousness, with the perfectly just society which, as such, would be free of all evils. To this extent Socrates's figuring out of the best social order and the prophets' vision of the messianic age are in agreement. Yet whereas the prophets predict the coming of the messianic age, Socrates merely holds that the perfect society is possible: whether it will ever be actual depends on an unlikely, although not impossible, coincidence, the coincidence of philosophy and political power. For, according to Socrates, the coming-into-being of the best political order is not due to divine intervention; human nature will remain as it always has been; the decisive difference between the best political order and all other societies is that in the former the philosophers will be kings or the natural potentiality of the philosophers will reach its utmost perfection. In the most perfect social order, as Socrates sees it, knowledge of the most important things will remain, as it always was, the preserve of the philosophers, i.e., of a very small part of the population. According to the prophets, however, in the messianic age "the earth shall be full of knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the earth" (Isaiah 11:9), and this will be brought about by God Himself. As a consequence, the messianic age

will be the age of universal peace: all nations shall come to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, “and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:2–4). The best regime, however, as Socrates envisages it, will animate a single city which, as a matter of course, will become embroiled in wars with other cities. The cessation of evils that Socrates expects from the establishment of the best regime will not include the cessation of war.

Finally, the perfectly just man, the man who is as just as is humanly possible, is, according to Socrates, the philosopher; according to the prophets, he is the faithful servant of the Lord. The philosopher is the man who dedicates his life to the quest for knowledge of the good, of the idea of the good; what we would call moral virtue is only the condition or by-product of that quest. According to the prophets, however, there is no need for the quest for knowledge of the good: God “hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God” (Micah 6:8).

Jill Jacobs was born in 1975. She was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary and also studied urban affairs at Hunter College. Her rabbinate has been characterized by involvement with social, economic, and political questions at such institutions as the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, Jewish Funds for Justice, and, for the last several years, T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, where she has served as Executive Director.

Jill Jacobs, *There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law and Tradition* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2009), 217–21.

The beauty of America is the opportunity for citizens of varying ethnic, religious, and ideological backgrounds to bring their own beliefs and experiences into the public debate. Ideally, the

conversation around public policy issues will become richer as a result of this diversity of opinion, and the resulting public policy will be more successful.

Yet Jews sometimes hesitate to speak as Jews in the public sphere. In contemporary America, public religious space has largely been claimed by the Christian right. Those who speak from a religious standpoint are assumed to care most about banning abortion and limiting the rights of gays and lesbians. In the past decade, the Christian left has grown, as organizations such as Call to Renewal and Evangelicals for Social Action have attempted to redefine Christian politics as a dedication, first and foremost, to poverty relief. Still, many progressives worry that speaking from our own religious tradition will lead to a debate about which religion has the better claim to truth, or will unwittingly legitimize others who claim to know God's political preferences. Others worry that strong Jewish voices in the political sphere will lead to increased anti-Semitism. We are conscious of the large numbers of Jews who play public roles in the U.S. government, and we have seen instances in which this public profile has led to scapegoating and resentment of Jews as a group.

The Jewish community has long been among the strongest voices for the separation of church and state. Jewish communal organizations and individuals have successfully opposed school prayer, the public display of religious symbols, and religious proselytizing in the military. This focus on preventing religious coercion has led many of us to believe that the Constitution calls only for a strict separation between religion and public life. But in addition to limiting the government's ability to provide any favoritism to one religion over another, the First Amendment also guarantees the rights of citizens to express their religious beliefs freely. No single set of religious beliefs should dominate public discourse, but religious beliefs can and should be brought into the public domain, just as any other ideologies, experiences, and insights would. As the

theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel commented when explaining his own involvement in justice issues, “We *affirm* the principle of separation of church and state. We *reject* the separation of religion and the human situation.”

The question for this generation is not how to become an “American in the street,” but how or whether it is possible to be an American Jew in the street, as well as in the home. The answer to this question may determine how Jews can bring Jewish law and tradition into the public square in such a way as to enrich the debate, rather than lead to a head-to-head collision with people of other faiths over the question of how God might vote.

Much of the American conversation about religion in the public square revolves around visible manifestations of religion, such as creches and Christmas trees on public property, or prayer and Bible study in school. The Jewish community expends significant resources on responding to these incidents, either by demanding the strict banishment of religion from public life or by promoting the inclusion of Hanukkah menorahs and other symbols of our own. It is important to protect the boundary between church and state in order for people of all religions to feel comfortable in public space, and in order to ensure that public displays of Christianity do not become coercive. At the same time, such displays of religion are ultimately symbolic, and they are less important than decisions about policies that affect the economic and social welfare of individual citizens and communities.

Many individual Jews play prominent roles in public life, as community organizers, public policy experts, legislators, and government officials. Some of these officials speak proudly of their Jewish commitments and inspirations; others keep their Judaism private. Some of these individuals have found a place in a Jewish community; others believe that their own commitments are incompatible with those of most Jewish communities. At the same time, many Jewish

organizations are deeply engaged in policy debates at local, state, national, and international levels. In some cases, this involvement focuses on specifically “Jewish issues,” such as Israel, separation of church and state, and private school funding. But many Jewish organizations—including local social justice groups, synagogues, and national bodies—devote themselves to issues as varied as reproductive choice, immigration, and international human rights. Many, or even most, of these organizations strive to speak about these issues with a Jewish voice. Most reference the Jewish experience of oppression, quote relevant Biblical verses, and ask prominent rabbis to give sermons and write articles that link Jewish thought to particular issues. Some publish materials aimed at helping individuals, synagogues, and schools to study issues from a Jewish perspective.

What is missing in much of this work is a real public discussion about how Jewish law and tradition might address contemporary policy questions. Those on either side of an issue often quote texts to support their points, but they do so in a way which does not invite debate or discussion. Instead, when Jews engage in the public discourse as Jews, we should bring Jewish law and principles into the conversation in such a way as to enrich, rather than shut down, the discourse. We should also bring into this dialogue Jews and others who are engaged in public life; the conversation among rabbis, public policy experts, grassroots activists, and Jewish communal professionals should generate a nuanced understanding of how the Jewish community might approach individual issues.

This approach precludes quoting a simplified version of Jewish law or text in order to prove a point, or asserting that Jewish law unequivocally demands a certain approach to an issue. Rather, Jewish sources should help us to see various sides of an issue, challenge our assumptions, and enable us to formulate a response that takes multiple factors into account. The commitment to

living our Judaism publicly should then push us to take public action in these principles, both as individuals and as a community.

If we succeed in facilitating this rich conversation, we will create a new kind of Jewish politics in America. Rather than trade sound bites, we will continue the talmudic tradition of dialogue, in which various questioners and commentators engage in an often messy conversation that eventually leads to fuller understanding of the situation at hand. Jews who now exercise their commitments to public life outside of the Jewish community will find a place within this community, as they contribute their own wisdom and observations to the conversation. Individual Jews and Jewish institutions will strengthen their commitment to public life, as the question of how to address current issues becomes part of the general Jewish conversation, rather than something separate from it or as an addition to discussion of Shabbat, *Kashrut*, and other aspects of Jewish practice. We will witness the emergence of a Judaism that views ritual observance, study, and engagement in the world as an integrated whole, rather than as separate and distinct practices. The Jewish community's deepened involvement in public life will change the face of religious politics in America, as other communities will recognize the Jewish community as an important and authentic religious voice in the public square of America. Finally, the integration of religion, legal discussion, and participation in public life will instill in the Jewish community the power to have a major impact on the ideologies and policies of the United States.