

# KENNETH HART GREEN'S *JEW AND PHILOSOPHER: THE RETURN TO MAIMONIDES IN THE JEWISH THOUGHT OF LEO STRAUSS*

Michael Wyschogrod

*Are philosophy and biblical faith compatible? Early, Strauss wrote that in every attempt to harmonize them, one of the two is sacrificed to the other. Later, he seemed to think that the two can co-exist peacefully, each learning from the other. I argue that there is no place for revelation in the life of reason. Because Maimonides was primarily a philosopher, he argued that there were rational grounds for all the commandments. Philosophy thus enslaves revelation instead of co-existing peacefully with it.*

Kenneth Hart Green's *Jew and Philosopher: The Return to Maimonides in the Jewish Thought of Leo Strauss* is a multifaceted study of Strauss's interpretation of Maimonides but, more importantly, of the role of Judaism in the thought of Strauss. My acquaintance with the writings of Strauss is not extensive enough to evaluate Green's Strauss interpretation on its merits. Interpretive caution is particularly indicated with respect to a writer who discerns esoteric doctrines in many authors — Plato and Maimonides among others — who have earned his attention. But if others held both esoteric and exoteric teachings, why could the same not be true of Strauss also? Green

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contends (p. 128) that "Strauss, in imitation of Maimonides, concealed his own true opinions artfully, appearing in the guise of a modern historical scholar." And if Strauss, why not Green? I do not hold any esoteric doctrines and have never been persecuted for anything I have written, only ignored. If esotericism is the answer to persecution, what is the answer to being ignored? Strauss would not have the answer to this problem because he was not ignored. He developed very loyal adherents indeed.

The basic question is whether philosophy and biblical faith are compatible. A superficial reading of the *Guide* would make it appear that they are but this superficial reading is only the exoteric teaching of Maimonides. The esoteric and therefore the real teaching of Maimonides is that they are not, but the general public must not learn this truth since to do so would undermine the political order. Maimonides is a Platonic philosopher pretending to be a Torah observant Jew which he is, but only externally. The enlightened understand that a commanding God who reveals his unfathomable will is philosophically untenable. The choice is between "A life of obedient love versus a life of free insight" (Strauss, quoted by Green on p. 123). Speaking of reason and revelation, Strauss writes: "In every attempt at harmonization, in every synthesis however impressive, one of the two opposed elements is sacrificed, more or less subtly but in any event surely, to the other" (as quoted by Green on p. 123). Green concludes (p.127): "As Strauss now formulates this dilemma, Maimonides unequivocally recognizes that 'being a Jew and being a philosopher are mutually exclusive,' because the one makes the most fundamental demand of human life something which stands in utter contradiction to what is crucial in the other."

Philosophy and Judaism are incompatible because the one is based on argument, the other on revelation. "The Bible is distinguished from all philosophy," writes Strauss (quoted by Green on p. 231, n. 79), "because it simply asserts that the world is created by God. There is not a trace of an argument in support of this assertion. How do we know that the world was created? The Bible declares it so. We know it by virtue of declaration, pure and simple, by divine utterance ultimately. Therefore, all knowledge of the createdness of the world has an entirely different character than our knowledge of the structure or articulation of the world." Argument, it seems, is at the heart of philosophy. The philosopher cannot simply assert something to be the case. He must support his position by invoking an argument. But what constitutes an argument? Does a Platonic argument not terminate in an insight which is "seen" and not argued to be true? How does the truth that the philosopher "sees" differ from

the truth that the believer "believes"? These questions can use a bit of unpacking.

Until I read Green's book, I thought that Strauss and Strauss's Maimonides stood squarely behind philosophy as the source of real truth with the Bible, interpreted fairly literally, serving to hold together the Jewish polity. Maimonides the philosopher and Maimonides the legalist of the *Mishneh Torah* thus represented the esoteric and exoteric aspects of the truth, the one truth and the other opinion, to use Platonic language. In this reading there is no conflict between Maimonides' Judaism and his philosophy. He is a Jew on the outside and a Greek philosopher on the inside. Writers like Isadore Twersky and Marvin Fox find this reading of Maimonides unacceptable because his Jewish orthodoxy is axiomatic to them. If anything, for them Maimonides is a Greek philosopher on the outside and a Jew on the inside. This underemphasizes the central role Greek philosophy plays in Maimonides' system. Nevertheless, I have not been comfortable with Strauss's esotericism either and I believe that Maimonides would have held a secret doctrine if he had been perfectly clear about the incompatibilities of his loyalties. He thought that the Bible could be made compatible with Greek philosophy through the rabbinic route. The rabbis often interpreted the Bible creatively and since they did so, so would Maimonides. The difference, of course, was that the creative biblical interpretation of the rabbis did not seek to make the Bible compatible with Greek philosophy. They had almost no interest in eliminating biblical anthropomorphism while this was one of Maimonides main concerns. Nevertheless, even if their motivations were different, the midrashic method opened the door for Maimonides to reinterpret the Bible as he saw fit. The discrepancy between the Bible and Greek philosophy was thereby greatly reduced.

Strauss is quoted as believing that philosophy and Judaism, thought and revelation, are incompatible. But then, Green or Strauss or both, reverse themselves. Modern philosophy, we are told (pp. 10, 41, 94) has never "refuted" revelation. While reason and revelation cannot be reconciled, they can be "taught how to respect and to learn from one another." (p. 135). "No one," writes Strauss (quoted p. 239, n. 2), "can be both a philosopher and a theologian or, for that matter, a third which is beyond the conflict between philosophy and theology, or a synthesis of both. But every one of us can be and ought to be either the one or the other, the philosopher open to the challenge of theology or the theologian open to the challenge of philosophy." Philosophy and theology need not be at war with one another; they can coexist peacefully.

I do not agree. It is not necessary for philosophy to refute revelation. There is simply no place for revelation in the life of reason. This is the message of the *Euthyphro*. If the content of revelation is rational, then we do not need revelation to know what is rationally true. If the content of revelation is not rational (e.g., the *Akedah*), then the philosopher cannot accept the irrational as binding simply because it is the will of God. This forces Maimonides to the conclusion that there are rational grounds for all the commandments, no matter how inexplicable they seem on the surface. He grows quite critical (*Moreh*, III, 31) toward those who disagree with him. It is a sickness to think that if "there is a thing for which the intellect could not find any meaning at all and that does not lead to something useful, it indubitably derives from God, for the reflection of man would not lead to such a thing. It is as if, according to these people of weak intellects, man were more perfect than his Maker; for man speaks and acts in a manner that leads to some intended end, whereas the Deity does not act thus, but commands us to do things that are not useful to us and forbids us to do things that are not harmful to us."

Here philosophy and theology do not respect and learn from one another but rather philosophy has enslaved theology. The content of revelation — the commandments — must be rational and if they are not, they cannot emanate from God because God is a rational being who does not issue irrational commandments. The question is whether this philosophical imperialism is necessary, whether it follows from the nature of philosophy or whether there is an alternate and more humble understanding of philosophy that recognizes the limits of understanding and the impact of history on the eternal truths of classical philosophy.

When Strauss pits philosophy against revelation, the philosophy in question is that of Plato and Aristotle. "Klein," writes Strauss (quoted on p. 169, n. 13), "was the first to understand the possibility which Heidegger had opened without intending it: the possibility of a genuine return to classical philosophy, to the philosophy of Aristotle and of Plato, a return with open eyes and in full clarity about the infinite difficulties which it entails." Aware of the skepticism such a proposal will arouse, Strauss comments that "a return to an earlier position is believed to be impossible. But one must realize that this belief is a dogmatic assumption whose hidden basis is the belief in progress or in the rationality of the historical process" (quoted on p. 170, n. 13). This is the point at which Strauss and Maimonides meet. For both, the truth is to be found in a Platonic Aristotelianism. It is this that draws Strauss to Maimonides, more than the latter's Judaism.