

# STRAUSS AND TEXTUAL REASONING

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Few thinkers have had a more polarizing effect on their readers than Strauss. This is quite strange, considering the field of inquiry he represents, which is the history of political philosophy. But this may be a misnomer, since no one could be more disdainful of history, in the sense developed from Hegel, to the Romantics, to the historical school (Ranke, Droysen), to the hermeneutics of Dilthey; Strauss is first and foremost a critic of the second order naïveté with which we take history for granted: as the fully valid representation of human reality from a completely immanent perspective.

Many readers, admirers and critics alike, take Strauss to advocate a radical choice between orthodoxy and atheism, one representing belief and the other unbelief. Most readers, especially in political theory, take Strauss to advocate atheism. Yet at the same time, given his Goethean praise of belief over unbelief, some readers take him to advocate orthodoxy over atheism, although in practice he himself clearly embraced nothing of the sort. Strauss is sometimes also requisitioned by modern orthodox Jews as a guide of the modern perplexed; to wit Kenneth Hart Green's well-known portrait of Strauss's "return" to Maimonides (*Jew and Philosopher*). Loyal Jew and supporter of Zionism and, eventually, of the State of Israel throughout his life, Strauss also strongly rejected Zionism

as a solution to the Jewish problem. In short, a thinker advocating and embracing many contradictions, Strauss remains a controversial and, we suggest in this special issue, important thinker of Judaism and modernity.

The introductory chapter to *Philosophy and Law* (1935) begins by laying out the radical alternative between atheism and orthodoxy, an alternative that, Strauss maintains, much of modern Judaism explicitly and implicitly denies, albeit at the expense of orthodoxy. Instead of proposing a “synthesis” between these opposites—which he argues elsewhere is not a true alternative anyway since both positions are based on irrational first assumptions and modern atheism is merely a negation of revelation in the Christian sense—Strauss suggests a backwards turn that famously leads him to consider philosophy and its relation to the Mosaic law as configured in the works of Maimonides and his Muslim predecessors. This turn to the sources of medieval philosophy should be of interest to textual reasoning even if one does not consider Strauss’s retrieval successful or share its philosophical presuppositions. What should be of particular interest is the relation between Strauss’s concern with an analysis of the modern Jewish theological-political conundrum and the modern crisis of religion and the search for an overcoming of the modern impasse by a work of excavation that simultaneously leads back to the “ancient tomes” and upward to the natural difficulties of philosophy as understood by the ancients.

Yet, as Mari Rethelyi’s piece in this issue reminds us, a backwards movement that serves the circumvention of a modern impasse may suffer from its hypermodern concern. What is the relation between history, philosophy, and hermeneutics in Strauss’s work? At least we need to reconsider Guttman’s critique which saw Strauss’s reading of Maimonides as too driven by an anti-modern way of posing atheism and orthodoxy or of belief and unbelief as radical alternatives. Imposing such an existentialist approach to the sources of Judaism seemed apt to turn the medieval distinction between reason and revelation into a radical either/or. While the editors do not believe that Guttman read Strauss accurately on this point, his suspicion of Strauss is one that is still shared by many and therefore needs to be reengaged.

While in his mature work, Strauss famously dedicated himself to the study and teaching of Platonic political philosophy, the medieval and modern Jewish sources remained important instantiations and sources of the problems that concerned him and to whose clearer conception he contributed his historical and philological work. Strauss remained committed to the study of Maimonides, and to developing his own position on him, as well as to what he considered the modern Jewish theological-political conundrum.

The present issue of *Textual Reasoning* is a modest attempt to raise the question whether Strauss has something to teach us about the project of textual reasoning. Our open call for papers went as follows.

Can Leo Strauss provide a model for a renewal of Jewish text study and Jewish thought? Has Strauss paradoxically created a way of harmonizing Judaism and philosophy by exploring their radical difference? What else is the program, formulated by the early Leo Strauss, of “learning through reading” than a universal application of the post-liberal imperative of textual reasoning? Strauss taught students of Plato, Macchiavelli, and Spinoza how to understand an author as he understood himself yet, from the beginning to the end of his hermeneutic adventures, Maimonides stands out as the author whose *Guide* tested Strauss’s mastery the most. Strauss belongs among the foremost critics of modern hermeneutics but are his strategies of use to the work of textual reasoning and postmodern Jewish text study? Despite all the great work done by Kenneth Hart Green and others, there remains much room for an exploration of Strauss as a reader of Jewish sources, from the Bible to Rosenzweig.

We called for submissions of papers on Strauss as a reader of Jewish texts, as a theorist of reading and writing, and as a philosopher of Jewish law, and suggested the following particular areas for such an exploration: Strauss on the Bible and on biblical sciences (historical critique, modern scholarship, critique of religion and biblical sciences, Spinoza), Strauss on medieval Jewish philosophical texts (exotericism/esotericism, prophetology and political philosophy, Maimonides), Strauss on modern

Jewish authors and texts (Mendelssohn, Cohen, Rosenzweig, critique of historicism), Strauss on revelation.

We are delighted to be able to present you with a first harvest of papers written in response to our call. The areas addressed by the papers range from Maimonideanism to modern Jewish thought to an overall critique of the early Strauss. The authors represent a variety of interests and most are junior scholars.

We hope that this issue of Textual Reasoning will stimulate a lively debate. The task of such a debate may be to clarify further how Strauss's intuitions may contribute to an existential analysis of the life-world presuppositions of Jewish philosophy. Such an analysis is perhaps more necessary today than ever when traditional modes of inquiry in the academic study of Judaism have become more out of touch with our reality and our actual needs than ever. We tend to retreat into historical and philological disciplines to hide from the political and first-order philosophical problems that all of us perceive but whose articulation is rarely aided by traditional academic approaches. Strauss may indeed be one of the few Jewish thinkers attentive to this problem and his reasoning and readings may awaken us to such attentiveness even where we do not share his particular leanings or find all of his positions and conclusions persuasive or even fully lucid.

### **Alan Verskin on Strauss on Maimonides**

Alan Verskin takes on Strauss's esotericism, one of the most vexing hermeneutic issues associated with the thought of Strauss. The "rediscovery" of the exoteric/esoteric is a key to Strauss's understanding not only of Platonic political philosophy in general and of Maimonides's Guide in particular, but also to his understanding of modern philosophy.

This rediscovery of the exoteric which, according to Strauss, determines the style of philosophical expositions makes several assumptions. The first assumption is that philosophers once knew that it was vital to hide their true opinion from the untutored multitude and that this vital knowledge was somehow lost and forgotten. The second assumption is that, to the degree that modern philosophers proceed

without awareness of the political need of exotericism recognized by the classic philosophical tradition, their works are likely to be flawed in two ways: their readings of the philosophical work of their predecessors is deficient because it takes at face value what is written (in the manner of a Protestant literalism), misconstruing in the process their exoteric doctrine for their true intention; and their own works lack any awareness of the naïveté with which they build their own systems on the flawed assumptions derived from their naïve readings. For Strauss, this philosophical forgetfulness is one of the main causes of the debacle of modern philosophy that leads to the effective end of philosophy as understood in the classical Platonic tradition. The denouement in relativism and nihilism of the modern idealist project of a philosophy of self-consciousness, diagnosed by critical thinkers from Jacobi to Nietzsche and Heidegger, can be healed only, so Strauss, by a vigorous excavation from the “second cave” and a restoration of the natural problem of philosophy posed by Socrates, i.e., the perennial problem of the right life.

Why does Platonic philosophy demand of the philosopher that s/he hide her true intentions? And why should this demand be accepted by philosophers grappling not just with philosophy but with revealed traditions, as exemplified by the thought of Maimonides and his Muslim predecessors? Strauss’s answer to this question, implying a “pagan” concept of revelation (in the sense of a revealed legislation, i.e., the laws of a state), is that philosophic truth and public order are incompatible. This insight engendered two solutions depending on its affirmation or its denial. While the Muslim and Jewish medieval solution, affirming incompatibility, had been to maintain a pious lie about the truth of revelation while the modern solution, denying incompatibility, was to affirm its opposite. Strauss believes that modernity has paid for its naïve notion of progress not just with the destruction of revelation but also of philosophy. Freedom from religious authority was bought at the price of shifting one’s trust to the illusion of a sufficiency of reason, esp. of the political sufficiency of reason.

In order to overcome this situation, Strauss takes the stance of a critical historian who comes to the aid of philosophy by reminding us of the

importance of reading carefully. One of the demands he makes is to consider the genre of a text. If one mistakes a multilayered, esoteric text for one that merely conveys its exoteric meanings, if, in other words, one discards allusions, allegories, and other means of indirection and substitutes for them the outward, literal, plain, or “carnal” meanings, one is forced to misread the original intention of the text. The historian has the task of recovering the intention of the philosophical author as s/he understood it him/herself rather than understanding him/her better than s/he understood him/herself.

Verskin raises the important question of what Strauss means by calling himself a historian and in what sense his writing is dedicated to a retrieval of the accurate and actual intention of the philosopher. In order to find the answer to this question, Verskin applies the Straussian analysis of esoteric intentions to his reading of Strauss’s own texts. Once Strauss discovered the esotericism of the philosophical tradition, he himself, so the argument, begins to practice the “art of careful writing,” the pivotal expression of which, among Strauss’s works, is his last great essay on Maimonides, “How to Begin to Study the *Guide of the Perplexed*.”

By virtue of this turn, Verskin allows us to bring Strauss into a conversation that goes beyond history, a meta-historical conversation of the kind that has inspired the work of what we call textual reasoning. In this view, what is interesting and most fertile about Strauss’s reading of Maimonides is not whether or not he advances our academic historical understanding of Maimonides but rather what he contributes to our understanding of Maimonides as a reader and as a genuine philosophical author. Strauss’s “history” is work in the interest of philosophy, whereby the latter is itself not merely a historical pursuit in the sense of Dilthey’s attempt at understanding but rather a perennial pursuit in Cohen’s sense of a participation in the problems, or the problem, of philosophy. From here, there is only a short (if any) step to the “new thinking” of Rosenzweig to which Strauss famously dedicated his first monograph, the study on *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*.

Verskin highlights problems that have been vexing Strauss’s readers from the outset. Is Strauss’s view of Enlightenment rationalism at the same

time an open polemic against it and a tacit approval of its critical presuppositions? Is the reason he believes one should return to the medieval philosophy of Maimonides and his predecessors the political necessity to hide the inherently atheistic presuppositions of science or did Maimonides provide access to an actual synthesis of revealed and rational truth? Taken such ambiguities as intentional, Verskin suggests that, beginning with *Philosophy and Law* and culminating in the introductory essay to the *Guide*, "How to Begin to Study the *Guide of the Perplexed*", Strauss uses a method of addressing multiple audiences at once. This method, Verskin believes, is comparable to the distinction between rhetorical, dialectical, and demonstrative arguments found in Averroes's writings and addressed to three types of readers. If there are different ways to understand Strauss, this may very well be due to the fact that Strauss himself directed different arguments to different audiences.

Verskin's bold and innovative reconstruction of three audiences—one naïve, the second pseudo-critical, and the third truly sophisticated—is intriguing even if, contrary to what is usually assumed and confirmed by Strauss's own utterings on the subject, it ignores the possibility that the positions presented in *Philosophy and Law* and those presented in later works are not simply continuous. Strauss himself, for example, later described the position he had taken in *Philosophy and Law* as a "Thomistic detour," and there are strong indications that Strauss did not embrace exoteric modes of exposition until a few years later. Unhistorical as it may be, Verskin's construal of a "third audience" nevertheless shows a position that may, in fact, be grounded in Strauss's dissatisfaction with the all-to-easy divvying apart of philosophy and law presented in *Philosophy and Law*. This is consistent with how Strauss seems to have worked on several occasions when he left behind tried and failed formulations, sometimes within the space of a single volume.

Verskin's argument aims to marshal Strauss in support of what Verskin himself wishes to extract from Strauss: the endorsement of a renewed synthesis of reason and revelation. Thus he writes,

Strauss pinpoints the Jewish break with tradition at Spinoza's critique of Maimonides in which Spinoza claimed to have rendered incoherent Maimonides' synthesis between reason and revelation, a synthesis which had provided for a concept of truth in revelation. I believe that Strauss's work is a rhetorical attempt to repair that break, and, in so doing, re-establish what he regards as the politically necessary belief that there is a valid and continuous Jewish tradition to which modern Jews are heir.

It is, indeed, a topic worthy of our attention whether Strauss has successfully presented us with a third position, beyond the naïve acceptance of the truth of revelation and beyond trust in the self-sufficiency of reason.

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### **Mari Rethelyi: Guttman's Critique of Strauss's Modernist Approach to Medieval Philosophy**

Beginning from a different angle but arriving at similar conclusions as Verskin, Mari Rethelyi rereads Julius Guttman's belated response to Strauss's critique of Guttman's famous *Philosophie des Judentums* (1930). As Rethelyi shows, Guttman's and Strauss's analysis of medieval Jewish sources are equally driven by the desire to derive a solution to the modern religious crisis.

Guttman and Strauss were not exactly buddies. While Guttman first recruited Strauss as a fellow of the Academy for the Science of Judaism (*Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*) and later gave him his first job as an employee of the academy, Strauss felt that the work he wrote under Guttman's supervision (*Spinoza's Critique of Religion*) was written under conditions of censorship. The position in Jewish philosophy at Hebrew University which Strauss applied for on the basis of a few essays on Jewish themes he put together under the title *Philosophy and Law* was awarded to Guttman instead. Despite their fundamental

disagreement, however, Guttman continued to respect Strauss and later, shortly before his death, proposed his name as that of his successor.

On the substance of the debate between Guttman and Strauss, the problem is not so much whether the 'law' rather than a modern 'religious consciousness' constitutes the proper substance of medieval Jewish thought but rather how we avoid imposing modern categories on pre-modern texts and whether such an avoidance is at all possible. As Leora Batnitzky points out in a forthcoming chapter on Strauss and the law, the Guttman-Strauss debate is a replay or a continuation of the problem Strauss raises in an essay on Cohen's interpretation of Spinoza, i.e., of the very piece (published in Buber's journal *Der Jude*) that first caught Guttman's attention and led to the fellowship offer. Strauss's spirited defense of the freedom to interpret Spinoza and Maimonides on the basis of an analysis of philosophical propositions but also, where this fails, in light of their pre-philosophical presuppositions, increasingly entangles Strauss in the very issues of reading and writing that are at the root of his rediscovery of the exoteric style of philosophical expositions, a style he eventually embraces in place of his early, seemingly historicist or existentialist, insistence on posing questions openly, even though they remain unanswerable. Put somewhat differently, while Strauss continued to pose questions quite openly he became more reticent to say what the answer was.

*Mari Rethelyi* is a Ph.D. candidate in Jewish Studies at the University of Chicago. Her research interests include modern Jewish intellectual history and academic representations of Judaism and Islam.

### **Piccinini on Strauss on Cohen on Spinoza**

Moritz Lazarus, who—with H. Steinthal—invented the discipline of ethnic psychology (*Völkerpsychologie*), once mused that, as a Jew growing up in a multiethnic society, he had no choice but to become an ethnic psychologist. With the same degree of justification we may say Strauss discovered the political nature of all philosophical writing by paying

attention to Jewish philosophy and Jewish philosophers. Signorina Piccinini argues that Strauss found confirmation and legitimization for his intuition in none other than Hermann Cohen. The latter's famously negative verdict on Spinoza's "humanly incomprehensible" betrayal, at a time when Spinoza was unanimously accepted by Jews and non-Jews alike as not only personally virtuous but as the only honest philosopher before Nietzsche, became the starting point of Strauss's own inquiry into the European critique of religion with which he began his intellectual path.

For Cohen, someone betraying his community and delivering damaging evidence of its deficiency to their enemies neither qualifies Spinoza as virtuous nor as a philosopher. As Piccinini shows, Strauss's admiration of Spinoza notwithstanding, he shares with Cohen not just a dedication to the honesty of critique but also a dedication to the virtue of fidelity, as evidenced in his life-long struggle to maintain a genuine connection with Judaism and the problems emerging from a confrontation between philosophy and the Mosaic legislation. Piccinini thus indicates how we can read Strauss as squarely belonging among the modern Jewish philosophers: those struggling to maintain loyalty to both, the authority of the Mosaic tradition and the radical critique of philosophical reasoning.

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## **Braiterman Against Leo Strauss**

Zachary Braiterman determines the place of the early Jewish thought of Leo Strauss as located "chronologically" and "logically" at the point of transition from a liberal tradition inaugurated by Mendelssohn to "the void of pure pathlessness." Strauss (or, more accurately, the early Jewish thought of Strauss) would be of no concern to us were he to be located here for chronological reasons only, in the crudest sense of a history of philosophy that lists this as coming after that; instead, Braiterman aptly emphasizes Strauss's role in marking a logical transition from a liberal

tradition to a “void of pure pathlessness.” Instead of stepping out of this void, Braiterman sees Strauss as leading us “into that nothing.” As Julius Guttmann, Friedrich Gogarten, and others, Braiterman thus views the early Strauss as an existentialist. In an apt word play, Braiterman likens Strauss’s radicalization of the alternatives between belief and unbelief, faith in the sufficiency of reason and faith in the insufficiency of reason, and atheism and orthodoxy to a “fire stream” or Feuerbach, alluding to the towering 19th-century critic of religion whose theory of faith as a projection onto the screen of heaven of our innate love for fellow-man remains a challenge to theism even today: Strauss as an inevitable obstacle to any thoughtless affirmation of either faith or of its opposite.

In keeping with his ongoing project, of which the present essay is a part, Braiterman offers a form of estrangement, a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. In order to explain Strauss’s logical and chronological position in the history of modern Jewish thought he describes it in analogy and close correspondence with corresponding trends in the history of modern art. While refraining from an overall aesthetic master-narrative that would embed religious discourse in a non-religious context, the modern Jewish philosophies nevertheless offer suggestive links with concerns of artistic theory: representation, revelation, image-making, the feminine, sobriety, imagination, thought and sensation, theater and agency, consciousness and its place between non-consciousness (technology) and super-consciousness, all these are themes common to the debate on *Neue Sachlichkeit* and the phenomenological call to return *zu den Sachen selbst*. Using a detour via Schlemmer, Kracauer, and Löwenthal, Strauss is grouped with those who “bludgeon religion, mysticism and metaphysics,” who “despise this kind of philosophy which makes of the hymn a system ... and twaddles on about creation, revelation, and redemption in such excited tones as to move a dog to pity.” Braiterman thus advances a spirited defense of the compromised and compromising, the much-maligned middle between abstract extremes. Instead of the disjunction of “obedience and freedom” he believes we are faced with a “postmodern mutation of the modern world, open to reason and

sensation" (emphasis added), called to behold the "fleeting presence that is at once *harut* and *herut* (...), inscribed and free upon the tablets of law."

It may be, however, that an affirmation of a modernist liberalism after Strauss is not the same as an affirmation of liberalism before Strauss. What Strauss accomplished in bringing to our awareness—the epistemological precariousness of every "synthesis" or, put differently, the political nature of all philosophic "reconciliations"—has forever qualified all attempts to make a home for the polis in the "middle" between extremes: not on the strength of argumentation and reason but on the strength of the rule of law alone can the extremes be overcome: only pragmatically, i.e., *sachlich*, even where philosophical differences remain irreconcilable. In other words, Strauss's version of postmodernism returns to medieval and ancient sources in order to critique and overcome illusory hopes in the actuality—rather than ideality—of progress.

*Zachary Braiterman* teaches modern Jewish thought and culture at Syracuse University. The author of *(God) After Auschwitz*, he is currently at work on a new work, *On Revelation and "the Spiritual in Art,"* from which this piece is taken. Zachary is a member of the board of the Society of Textual Reasoning.

## Concluding Questions

Taken as a whole, the essays in this special issue leave us with a number of important avenues for further pursuit in considering Strauss's thought and its place within modern Jewish thinking. Signorina Piccinini's and Zachary Braiterman's essays have made clear the necessity of placing Strauss within the context and canon of German-Jewish thought. If Strauss, in different ways, has deep affinities with Cohen and Rosenzweig, how might this alter readings of Strauss within contemporary Jewish thought? At the same time, how might this conceptual affinity with Strauss alter the receptions of Cohen and Rosenzweig? Braiterman has suggested strongly that these associations ought to render all three figures suspect, if not, to use his terms, an entry into the "nothing." But emphasizing, as Piccinini does, Strauss's affinity

with Cohen, might we not ask also whether the questions that Strauss poses are the right ones? Is it enough to dismiss Strauss because he, as Braiterman states, leads us into a “void of pure pathlessness”? Such a view in fact begs Strauss’s own question: are there human questions that can’t be answered and human problems that can’t be solved?

In his return to Platonic political philosophy, Strauss remains true to the philosophical legacy of Hermann Cohen who, instead of arguing for a synthesis between fundamentally different cultural traditions argued for their simultaneity and mutual dependence maintained within what he called “the unity of cultural consciousness,” a psychological category rather than a historical one. As a historian of radical probity, Strauss restored the constitutive elements that had illegitimately been blended with one another to the detriment of our ability to distinguish fact from fiction, the real from the ideal, the things as they are and things as they ought to be. We would suggest that the ultimate judgment of the philosophy of Strauss should thus be drawn from his philosophical position, notwithstanding his chronological one, however suggestive.

This isn’t to imply of course that it is all that easy to locate Strauss’s philosophical position. Once again, in considering this question we consider Strauss’s own questions. This issue requires, as Alan Verskin shows, that we define philosophy in the context of textual reading. While Strauss can be read as suggesting that the esoteric meaning is the truth, while the exoteric meanings are lies, if noble ones, it is also important to remember Strauss’s claim that “the problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things.” Is it possible to read Strauss as suggesting that there are different kinds of truths—just as there are multiple human goods—that cannot be reconciled? Is it a modern prejudice to believe that we all must attain the same truth? Put differently, does a claim for the centrality of textual reasoning perhaps require an acknowledgment of not just different readings but different truths, the hierarchy of which is certainly political, and not just philosophical, in nature?

Ironically in the context of the often-stated opinion that Strauss’s views of esotericism means that he regards the medievals as

fundamentally dishonest, Strauss's concern with the relation between philosophy and law, and later between esotericism and exotericism, grows out of a sense that it is modern intellectuals, and not the medievals, who are intellectually dishonest. One of Strauss's main criticisms of modern Jewish thought is that it refuses to acknowledge the fundamental break with the Jewish past that emancipation brings. This refusal, from Strauss's point of view, is not merely of historical significance (for one thing, this is perhaps the most obvious fact of modern European Jewish history) but of theological and philosophical significance. The refusal to acknowledge this difference, Strauss maintains, is ultimately a philosophical and theological rejection of the veracity of revelation that differs only in intention from the seemingly devastating modern critiques of religion.

In his analysis of the lack of probity in modern Jewish thought, Strauss would find an unlikely ally in the thought of his American contemporary, Mordechai Kaplan. Kaplan in fact begins his most theological work, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, by chastising contemporary Jewish thinkers for their lack of intellectual probity. As he puts it, "Sentimentally attached to the old and distrustful of the new, they try to persuade themselves and others that no radical change has taken place in human thinking, and that none is necessary in the Jewish religion." In terms of the content of their thoughts, it would perhaps be difficult to find a more dissimilar pair of thinkers than Strauss and Kaplan. But the impetus for their respective philosophies begins with the same underlying premise: that modernity constitutes a fundamental break with the Jewish past and that modern Jewish thinkers have refused to acknowledge this break with disastrous consequences for the possibility of contemporary Jewish life. Whereas the targets of Kaplan's criticism are the ideologues of the reform and conservative movements in America, Strauss's targets are the German-Jewish thinkers who influenced these practical ideologies.

The real disagreement between Kaplan and Strauss lies in what is lost in and gained by modernity. 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.

Whatever one's final opinion of Strauss is, he remains in significant ways a very contemporary thinker and, as we think this issue shows, an important, if controversial thinker for those committed to the centrality of textual reasoning, both academically and perhaps even religiously.

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