

## CHAPTER 1

# “In the Grip of the Theological-Political Predicament”

### The Theological-Political Problem and the Jewish Question

In many respects, 1965 marks a special occasion in the academic career of Leo Strauss. In that year, two of his earliest books are republished in translation. An American publisher brings out *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, the English translation of his first book, which had originally appeared in German in 1930. Concurrently, a German publisher issues *Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft*, the German original of a text of 1936, which until then had only been available in English as *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*.<sup>1</sup> In both cases, something of an old debt is settled. With the first book, Strauss's English-speaking audience finally gains access to a scholarly debut that was received as an important achievement in its day. Conversely, the publication of the original book on Hobbes offers the German readership a further opportunity to get acquainted with his work. Moreover, it provides a belated compensation for the disappointments Strauss had to endure in the 1930s, when he found no German publisher prepared to print the work of a Jewish scholar.<sup>2</sup>

As is customary on such occasions, Strauss adds a foreword to both texts, in which he looks back at the road traveled and supplies elements of an intellectual biography. Reading these forewords in conjunction, the reader cannot fail to be struck by two passages. The preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* begins as follows: “This study . . . was written between the years 1925–1928 in Germany. The author was a young Jew, born and raised in Germany, who found himself in the grip of the theological-political predicament.”<sup>3</sup> In the foreword to the Hobbes book, Strauss refers to his research on Baruch Spinoza while adding an important declaration: “My

study of Hobbes began in conjunction with an investigation of the origins of the critique of the Bible in the seventeenth century, in particular of Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* . . . Since then the theological-political problem has remained *the* theme of my investigations."<sup>4</sup>

In the case of an exceptionally careful reader and writer like Strauss, any coincidence can safely be ruled out. By dividing a single message over two distinct audiences, he not only bridges the two worlds of his native and his adoptive country, but he also joins two halves of a life devoted to scientific research and intersected by a world war. With unusual emphasis, moreover, he points to what he regards as the core and Leitmotiv of his life and work. In almost four decades, we may infer, the "grip of the theological-political predicament" has not slackened, even though his understanding of it may have changed, as the shift from "predicament" to "problem" seems to indicate. At any rate, it seems that, by Strauss's own directions, any attempt to understand his work must focus on "the theological-political problem."

However, the picture proves to be more intricate. In 1962, presumably while composing the preface to the book on Spinoza, Strauss gave a lecture at the Hillel House of the University of Chicago. On this occasion, he told his audience, many of whose members were Jewish: "I believe that I can say without exaggeration that since a very, very early time the main theme of my reflections has been what is called 'the Jewish Question'"<sup>5</sup> No less deliberate and no less emphatic than the other two, this statement is apparently directed to yet another audience, and it complicates our initial question, what does Strauss mean by "the Jewish Question," and how is it related to the "theological-political problem"? Are they identical, or is the former rather an instance of the latter? In order to answer these questions, we do well to turn to the beginnings. In the 1920s, the young Strauss was an adherent of political Zionism who energetically participated in a number of debates concerning what was then called "the Jewish Question": the conditions, the identity, and the future of the Jews in Europe. At this "very, very early time," his commitment was marked by a keen interest in the relationship between political and religious-theological issues.

### **Back to Reality: Emancipation, Assimilation, and Zionism**

The historical issues underlying the Jewish Question can be defined with some accuracy. The term became current during the second half of the nineteenth century when, following a period of relative quiet and stability, the presence and the place of Jews in Europe was called into question with unprecedented vehemence. In Eastern Europe, thousands of mostly orthodox

Jews were killed or put to flight in violent pogroms. However, the secularized and assimilated Jews living in the liberal democracies of Western Europe did not remain unaffected either. Notwithstanding their formal equality before the law as citizens, they were put apart once again, in many cases more intensely than before. What had been known for centuries as *risbus*, viciousness against Jews, had returned in pseudoscientific garb under the name of "anti-Semitism." Before long, the Jewish Question was put on a par with other great issues of the time, such as the "Social Question" and the "Labor Question."

Profound disillusionment with the failure of liberal democracy pushed many assimilated Jews into a crisis. While assimilation proved unable to live up to its promises—to end discrimination and promote legal and social equality—doubts regarding its effectiveness produced a feeling of powerlessness. The Jewish individual who had assimilated in order to escape what the poet Heinrich Heine had called "*das dunkle Web*," the "dark pain" or "dark misfortune" of being a Jew, found himself in a situation hardly more enviable and hardly less precarious.<sup>6</sup> Confronted with the persistence of discrimination, he had to do without the resilience of his ancestors, who had been able to invoke and emulate a glorious and heroic Jewish past. The wealth of this past, the meaning it had acquired in the course of long and profound suffering, had been discounted by assimilation in a potentially endless historical progress.<sup>7</sup> The option of a liberal, secularized modernity thus appeared as a painfully superficial and unsatisfying solution. For this reason, many assimilated Jews engaged in active political self-organization. By constructing their own state, they aimed to build a safe haven where physical and spiritual persecution and repression would come to an end, if necessary by enforcing recognition. The Zionist movement originated when, at the end of the nineteenth century, the passage of large groups of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe, fleeing the violence of the pogroms, rekindled the dream of a return to Palestine among many West European Jews.<sup>8</sup>

Initially, however, the efforts of the small and insular Zionist societies—orthodox as well as assimilated—to aid the so-called *Ostjuden* in building a new life were hardly organized or coordinated, and of a humanitarian and philanthropic rather than a political nature. For most German Zionists, the idea of a Jewish nation was at best a beautiful dream that in no way affected their loyalty to the German state. Only by the turn of the century did Zionism evolve into a full-blown Jewish nationalism. With his classic pamphlet *The Jewish State* (*Der Judenstaat*, 1896), the Austrian journalist and writer Theodor Herzl attempted to unify and focus the dormant and dispersed Zionist ambitions, giving them a markedly political turn. Deeply impressed by

the Russian pogroms as well as by the Dreyfus Affair in France, Herzl announced the failure of emancipation and assimilation: in spite of their exalted promises, they had proved unable to end the discrimination of Jews. Banishing anti-Jewish sentiments to the margins of society had, in fact, allowed them to proliferate and intensify.<sup>9</sup> In the face of renewed anti-Semitism, assimilation proved to be powerless and blind, insofar as it denied or trivialized the gravity of the situation. In Herzl's view, assimilation proved to be merely a continuation of *galut*, the Jewish exile, and thus also of the discomfort and the dangers that accompanied it.

Instead of emancipation from without, promoted and organized by the European nation states, Herzl advocated the self-emancipation of the Jewish people. This goal could be realized only by political means, he argued: any legal or social solution was precluded a priori by the problems inherent in liberalism, so that the Jews had no other recourse than to develop into a united and organized power.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Herzl's strictly political approach to the Jewish Question implied that he attached no primary importance to Jewish language, culture, tradition, or even religion in the establishment of a Jewish state. In reaction, other currents within Zionism emerged that sought to correct and remedy this putative one-sidedness. Thus, motivated by what it saw as political Zionism's neglect of the Jewish tradition, so-called *cultural* Zionism emerged. Its founder, the writer Ahad Ha'am, argued that a purely political approach to the Jewish Question was untenable, insofar as the pursuit of a *Jewish* state as such implied a decisive concession to the Jewish tradition. According to Ahad Ha'am, a Jewish nation could not exist if it did not make room for a proper Jewish national culture, the so-called Jewish content (*Jüdische Inhalte*) in which Jewish religious experience expressed itself.

Going beyond cultural Zionism, religious Zionism, founded in 1902, argued that the nationalist struggle could only be a means to the religious end of reuniting the Jewish people under the Torah, the revealed law. For this reason, it opposed the approach of both political and cultural Zionism. Finally, opposed to Zionism in all its varieties was Jewish neoorthodoxy. Founded by Samson Raphael Hirsch at the end of the nineteenth century and led in the 1920s by his grandson Isaac Breuer, it anathemized Zionism as *apikorsuth*, or Epicureanism, a synonym for apostasy, atheism, and the self-centered pursuit of this-worldly comfort.

In spite of disagreement and opposition, Herzl managed to play off against each other the Jewish interests and those of the international powers with an exceptional feeling for diplomacy and an acute political instinct, in such a way that Jewish unity became a possibility, if not a reality. In this way,

he ushered in a second phase in which Zionism, albeit not without great effort, gradually gathered political momentum. The First World War did not so much interrupt this process as subject it to a profound revision. As Jehuda Reinharz argues in his study of the German Zionist movement, the war threw Zionism back on itself and forced it to reflect on its own foundations and presuppositions, at a point in time when discord between different Zionist groups seemed to have been more or less overcome. In the light of these new conditions, Herzl's diplomatic approach turned out to be as insufficient as the initial philanthropy. Heated debates erupted again, and, as Reinharz points out, "they required new, far-reaching commitments of every Zionist, as well as a revision of his identity as a Jewish nationalist living in Germany."<sup>11</sup> As a result of their experiences in Germany as well as abroad, young Zionists found themselves in a tangled web of conflicting claims: the political pursuit of a Jewish state, the requirements of German citizenship, the role of the Jewish tradition, and the influence of German culture.

### "God and Politics"

This third phase of Zionism, its postwar introspection, is the stage on which Leo Strauss, a young graduate in philosophy, makes his first appearance. Raised in an orthodox family, he was, in his own words, "converted to simple, straightforward political Zionism" at the age of seventeen.<sup>12</sup> As an active but by no means uncritical member of a Zionist student organization, Strauss espoused the strictly secular political approach advocated by Herzl.<sup>13</sup> Thus, one of his earliest writings begins with the following programmatic assertion: "It is the view of political Zionism that the plight of the Jews can only be alleviated by the establishment of a Jewish state, by the consolidation of the power of Jewish individuals into the Jewish power of the people."<sup>14</sup> In other writings of the same period, Strauss makes clear that this endeavor is essentially and irrevocably *modern*. It is a struggle to end Jewish exile predicated on the destruction of its religious foundations:

Political Zionism has repeatedly characterized itself as the will to normalize the existence of the Jewish people, to normalize the Jewish people . . . In truth, the presupposition of the Zionist will to normalization, that is, the Zionist negation of *galut*, is the conviction that "the power of religion has been broken."<sup>15</sup>

Political Zionism's claim to legitimacy vis-à-vis contemporary Jews is thus ultimately founded on the success of the critique of religion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Strauss explains that:

when Europe criticized itself, that is, its Christianity, it *eo ipso* criticized Judaism. That this critique *made an impact on* the Jewish context, is illustrated historically by the fact that the Jewish tradition, insofar as it was not able to reconstruct itself with regard to this critique, succumbed to the European attack. Here lies the decisive cause of what is known as assimilation, which therefore is Jewishly legitimate also from this perspective.<sup>16</sup>

As a necessary consequence, Strauss points out, “Political Zionism, wishing to ground itself radically, must ground itself in unbelief (*sich als ungläubig begründen*).”<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere, he formulates this implication in a way that leaves nothing to be desired in the way of clarity: “Political Zionism is the organization of unbelief within Judaism; it is the attempt to organize the Jewish people on the basis of unbelief.”<sup>18</sup> This sober, uncompromising understanding of political Zionism is characteristic of the position Strauss takes in the postwar debates. First, it leads him to challenge Herzl’s view that assimilation is merely a continuation of Jewish exile, and that only political Zionism can make a radical break with this past.<sup>19</sup> Rather, he argues, this break can be shown to precede *both* assimilation *and* Zionism, insofar as *both* are essentially opposed to the “lack of reality” (*Entwirklichkeit*) of the exile. Under *galut*, Jewish existence was literally “abnormal”: it stood outside the historical process in which the other nations faced each other as political entities. By the same token, the unity and cohesion of the Jewish people in the *galut* were based on the complete absence of a political center. Deprived of the natural conditions of existence, the vitality of the Jewish people was sustained and nourished only by faith in divine providence, but precisely this faith precluded normal political action. Thus, the essence of *galut* consists in the fact that “it provides the Jewish people with a maximal possibility of existence by means of a minimum of normality.”<sup>20</sup>

In the long run, however, this unreal, apolitical existence proved to be untenable, Strauss continues. The modern critique of religion and its political correlate, the liberal political thought of the French Revolution, offered a way out. Among other things, the secular separation of church and state offered Jews the opportunity to join the “normal” historical, economic, social, and political reality of the non-Jewish world.<sup>21</sup> Initially, this “return to reality” (*Einwirklichkeit*) occurred on the individual level, when individual Jews detached themselves from Jewish faith and tradition, and participated actively in non-Jewish life. When the achievements of this process were subsequently called into question both by Jews and non-Jews alike, it became apparent that the return to reality could be successful only to the extent that it was undertaken on a collective, political level.

Hence, assimilation and political Zionism are not opposed, Strauss holds. They are two distinct but complementary phases within the same process of the return to reality. What is more, political Zionism would never have been possible without assimilation and its attendant contact with European culture. Assimilation primarily meant that religious matters were relegated from the public sphere to the private sphere. This created a space in which assimilated Jews could submit to a profound "Germanization" (*Eindeutschung*), an immersion in German culture and its characteristic blend of historical consciousness and nationalism.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Strauss asserts, political Zionism is essentially a *modern* movement, a child of the nineteenth century, just as assimilation was a child of the eighteenth.<sup>23</sup>

More importantly, however, Strauss's understanding of political Zionism as essentially based on unbelief leads to a sharp critique of other contemporary currents within Zionism that nevertheless attempt to integrate religion in their pursuit of a Jewish state. Thus, he repeatedly attacks cultural Zionism, and its attempts to reintegrate the Jewish content. Strauss firmly rejects this approach on two grounds:

This "content" cannot simply be adopted, not only because the content is conditioned by, and supportive of *galut* and therefore endangers our Zionism but also because inherent in this content as religious content is a definite claim to truth that is not satisfied by the fulfillment of national demands.<sup>24</sup>

At the core of this claim to truth, he goes on to explain, is the independent existence of God, which cannot be reduced to mere human culture or human experience: "That religion deals *first* with 'God' and *not* with the human being, that this conception is the great legacy of precisely the Jewish past—this our ancestors have handed down to us, and this we wish to hold on to honestly and clearly."<sup>25</sup> By reducing this legacy to mere culture, cultural Zionism proves to be based on modern atheism, in spite of its own claims to the contrary.

In his autobiographical prefaces, Strauss spells out his critique of cultural Zionism in more detail. As he argues there, cultural Zionism's alleged return to Jewish tradition was insincere and bound to fail, since it was based on a profound modification of the Jewish tradition. Inspired by the thought of German Idealist thinkers like G. W. F. Hegel and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, cultural Zionism understood the Jewish tradition as "high culture" (*Hochkultur*), the product of the Jewish "folk spirit" (*Volksgeist*). In doing so, however, it departed from the tradition's self-understanding, which traced the origin of Jewish culture not to a human, but to a divine

act. According to the tradition, the people of Israel were distinguished from all other peoples by divine election through receiving the revealed law. As a result, the Jewish people is what it is by dint of something that cannot be reduced to the “folk spirit,” national culture, or national consciousness. Strauss observes:

And if you take these things with a minimum of respect or seriousness, you must say that they were not meant to be products of the Jewish mind. They were meant to be ultimately “from Heaven” and this is the crux of the matter: Judaism cannot be understood as a culture. . . . The substance is not culture, but divine revelation.<sup>26</sup>

If cultural Zionism wanted to remain consistent in its objections to political Zionism, it had no choice but to transform itself into religious Zionism, Strauss asserts. This, however, implied a profound change in priorities: “when religious Zionism understands itself, it is in the first place Jewish faith and only secondarily Zionism.”<sup>27</sup> If religion prevails over political concerns, the reconstitution of the Jewish state is no longer exclusively nor essentially a matter of human intervention, but it becomes dependent on the coming of the Messiah, who will inaugurate *tikkun*, the great restoration. Religious Zionism is based on the conviction that the Jewish Question is an absolute problem, the result of a divine dispensation. From this perspective, the difficulties of the “unreal” life in exile are an inalienable part of a divine providence unfathomable to man. They are signs that indicate the Jewish people have been elected by the creator to assume the sufferings of the world and to receive and spread ultimate salvation. Since these ordeals are imposed by a superhuman power, they can be ended only by that same power. Every attempt to achieve this goal by merely human means must therefore be rejected as blasphemous and false. According to religious Zionism, the insolubility of the Jewish Question is the core of Jewish identity. The establishment of the state of Israel may seem to be the end, but it is, in fact, a continuation by other means of the *galut*, a relative solution to what is, in fact, an absolute problem.

Strauss’s uncompromising view of political Zionism, then, proves to be matched by a no less radical understanding of religion. In his early writings, he repeatedly insists on their mutual incompatibility, while forcefully dismissing any attempt at synthesis and integration as jeopardizing the Zionist cause. For this reason, he criticizes not only cultural Zionism but also religious Zionism and even the anti-Zionism of Jewish neoorthodoxy. From the neoorthodox perspective, Zionists were apostates who had been



unable to resist the temptations of modern European culture, and who had abandoned religious faith in divine providence for the sake of a secular trust in progress and human autonomy. In this way, neoorthodoxy argued, Zionism had surrendered Judaism to the power, the discretion and the mutual quarrels of the modern nation states and undermined Jewish resilience. In its view, the failure of assimilation proved that Jews could find salvation only in theocracy, faith, and obedience to the revealed Law. Instead of trying to find a place among the other nations, the Jews ought to remain in exile, since the latter could be truly ended only by the coming of the Messiah. The violence of the *goyim* or non-Jews had to be endured resignedly, in the knowledge that justice ultimately was on the side of the Jewish people.

Strauss forcefully dismisses these accusations as well as the view underlying them. In his rejoinder, he charges his opponents with dangerous political naïveté as well as with intellectual dishonesty. To begin with, he argues that neoorthodoxy's angry polemic against Zionism hardly contributes to alleviating the predicament of German Jews.<sup>28</sup> Second, its simplistic presentation of the relationship between the Jewish people and the other peoples as a matter of "justice against injustice" constitutes a serious obstacle to reaching a viable political balance of powers. Third, he objects to the fact that, in spite of its antipolitical discourse, neoorthodoxy nevertheless deploys a political strategy that is not devoid of demagoguery: its defense of theocracy mobilizes the fundamental religious premises primarily because of their political utility, not because of their meaning and content.

According to Strauss, religious neoorthodoxy deploys a purely consequentialist argument. It preaches faith and obedience to Mosaic law by systematically emphasizing their salutary consequences, such as national unity, social cohesion, the fulfillment of psychological needs, or the even force of habit. If the law is upheld for these reasons, it argues, faith in the fundamental religious dogmas is wont to follow. For Strauss, this view amounts to an outright reversal of priorities. The only valid reason for obedience to the law, he rejoins, is the existence of God and the authority of Mosaic revelation.<sup>29</sup> If the law is to be obeyed, it is to be obeyed because it is the will of God, revealed by him directly and miraculously to Moses, and not because obedience has salutary consequences. By giving precedence to human concerns over God and the Torah, neoorthodoxy forgets "that religion deals *first* with 'God' and *not* with the human being." The view that the deeper meaning of the law consists in its "therapeutic" effects nullifies the seriousness of faith, and culminates in rigid dogmatism. Strauss's dismissal is particularly scathing: "For the sake of such a 'deeper' meaning of the Law one swallows the dogmas whole, unchewed, like pills. One asserts

that that without inspiration the Law would lose its binding force, and one forgets that one doesn't base it on inspiration at all."<sup>30</sup>

If neoorthodoxy were to be consistent, it would recognize that "the question of God and His revelation must be posed quite simple-mindedly and honestly, without regard to any actual disadvantages involved."<sup>31</sup> As a result, it would be compelled to reaffirm in all clarity the traditional Jewish theological dogmas. In its turn, political Zionism would be able to express its fundamental objections and reservations regarding the dogmas. At the same time, it would be able to show its loyalty to the great heritage of the Jewish past. Thus, it would finally come to light that political Zionism does not conduct "a battle against the rule of the Torah of God," as neoorthodoxy claims, but merely wants to maintain a critical distance with regard to religion, Strauss holds. This critical distance is ultimately rooted in "the fact that, as a result of the European critique, the dogmatic presuppositions of Orthodoxy have been recognized as questionable."<sup>32</sup> As a result, Strauss argues, political Zionism necessarily must embrace liberalism: "the Zionism I wish to characterize as primarily political Zionism is liberal, that is, it rejects the absolute submission to the Law and instead makes individual acceptance of traditional contents dependent on one's own deliberation."<sup>33</sup>

As Strauss himself observed: "when religious Zionism understands itself, it is in the first place Jewish faith and only secondarily Zionism."<sup>34</sup> Neoorthodoxy takes this argument one step further, asserting that putting Jewish faith first requires abandoning Zionism. As a result, it cannot regard the factual, historical establishment of the state of Israel as *tikkun*, but merely as a phase—albeit an important one—in the *galut*: "The establishment of the state of Israel is the most profound modification of the *galut* which has occurred, but it is not the end of the *galut*: in the religious sense, the state of Israel is a part of the *galut*."<sup>35</sup> Even more than for religious Zionism, for neoorthodoxy the Jewish Question is an absolute problem, a token of divine election. From this perspective, the establishment of the state of Israel can never be more than a relative solution that leaves intact the absolute character of the theological-political problem.

However, Strauss's effort to understand rigorously both political Zionism and Jewish religion reveals a profound tension. Although he cautions that the Jewish content endangers political Zionism, he nevertheless asserts that this content contains a specific ancestral legacy he wishes to hold on to "clearly and honestly," even while admitting that political Zionism cannot satisfy the claim to truth that inhabits this legacy. Underlying these concerns, a fundamental problem becomes visible. The process of returning to reality ultimately aims at a reversal of the specific relationship between

conditions of existence and normality that characterizes life under *galut*. On the one hand, it strives toward a maximum of normality: the Jewish people must leave the ahistorical and apolitical isolation upheld by faith in a divine promise, and act as a people among other peoples. On the other hand, however, this means that the conditions of existence of the Jewish people as a specifically *Jewish* people are minimized. Normalization, understood as becoming historical and political, entails that certain distinctive characteristics of Jewish identity are relinquished, such as faith in divine election, in Mosaic revelation, and in the coming of the Messiah. The faith-based internal cohesion of the Jewish people is lost, and as a result the Jewish identity of the remaining individuals becomes deeply problematic. Differently stated: with the descent of the *Luftvolk* to the solid ground of historical and political normality, the survival of Judaism as Judaism is put at risk.<sup>36</sup>

Political Zionism, Strauss observes, does not counteract the "de-Judaizing" (*entjudende*) tendencies of assimilation—as Herzl hoped it would—but it actually sustains them.<sup>37</sup> As a result, political Zionism is faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, it derives its legitimacy from the conscious and radical break with the world of *galut* and with the religious foundations of the Jewish tradition. On the other hand, insofar as it claims the title of "Zionism," it cannot avoid referring to that same tradition. Precisely this claim to be *Zionism*—even if it is *political* Zionism—shows that Jewish nationalism has ties to traditional hopes that it can never completely sever without compromising its name.<sup>38</sup> Strauss formulates this dilemma concisely with reference to the process of returning to reality:

This is precisely our present-day dilemma, namely, that . . . this path has deviated, and has had to deviate, from the content that alone could fulfill this reality; for the attitude that held this content together like an iron ring, the spirit that was alive in them, was the spirit of *galut*.<sup>39</sup>

Political Zionism's appeal to the "will" of the Jewish people ultimately proves to beg the question. Mere normalization, Strauss notes, is not enough: "A people like all other peoples' cannot be the program of self-critical Zionism."<sup>40</sup> Clearly, this puts him in a very difficult position. On the one hand, the Jewish people cannot survive *without* politics: the closed world of faith and *galut* has been definitely and irretrievably destroyed by modern science and modern politics. On the other hand, it cannot survive with politics *alone*: its legacy continues to emit a claim that is constitutive of Jewish identity and thus cannot be ignored.<sup>41</sup> This claim, however, inevitably points back to religion, which, properly understood, is apolitical and even

excludes politics. Jacob Klein, one of his oldest friends, aptly summed up the “theological-political predicament” in which the young Strauss found himself: “His primary interests were two questions: one, the question of God; and two, the question of politics.”<sup>42</sup> As his early writings show, his vigorous attempts to keep the two questions separate only reveal a more profound interrelatedness. That Strauss was aware of this is borne out by the fact that in his early writings, he explores the possibilities of doing justice to both the principles of modern science and modern politics and the demands of the Jewish legacy, without resorting to halfhearted and inconsistent compromises or syntheses.

### Biblical Politics, Biblical Science, and the New Theology

Simply put, Strauss searches for ways of reading the Bible freed from traditional and dogmatic elements, and in conformity with the demands of modern science. This combination, he hopes, will enable political Zionism to relate to the great legacy of the Jewish past without compromising its secular and political orientation. This approach requires rejecting all the theological presuppositions traditionally involved in explaining the history of the Jewish people, Strauss asserts. In taking this position, he sides with the renowned historian Simon Dubnow, whose monumental history of Judaism appears in the course of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>43</sup> Interpreting early Jewish history, Dubnow attempts to explain the events that are related in the Bible solely in terms of natural, political, economic, and cultural factors. Although he is very critical of many aspects of Dubnow’s approach, Strauss generally agrees with the latter’s sober, political perspective. To boot, he adds, the Bible itself can be seen to contain several natural, causal explanations that support this perspective:

Thus, the biblical sources themselves give us the possibility of arriving at a—perhaps not deep, but nevertheless accurate—conception of the beginnings of our people. We are thereby urged to assume that the theological conception of these beginnings may derive from a time in which there was no longer any political life, and therefore also no longer any political understanding.<sup>44</sup>

In this pragmatic perspective, the traditional, theological reading of the Bible must be considered as the product of the particular conditions of *galut*, in which the Jewish people were cut off from historical and political reality. Therein lies the specific value of Dubnow’s approach for political Zionism, Strauss points out. It is the means par excellence to promote the political

awareness of modern Judaism. Moreover, by deriving this purely political account from the Bible itself, it disarms Zionism's opponents, who continue to appeal to the traditional reading.<sup>45</sup>

But, in that case, what happens to religion? According to Strauss, Dubnow's work is rooted in the modern critique of religion, and as such it is an indispensable aid for political Zionism. However, as he also notes, Dubnow's resistance to the traditional reading of the Bible is primarily aimed against what he holds to be the central Jewish dogma: the existence and providence of God in relationship to Jewish history. In Dubnow's reading, there is no place for God as a "real presence," as a provident, wrathful, and just creator: at the most, God is an object, a projection of human experience. Under what conditions, then, can political Zionism nevertheless address the question regarding God and revelation, as Strauss demands? And what happens to the recognition of the primacy of God that is at the core of the Jewish legacy? Isn't it simply excluded by Dubnow's purely pragmatic and causal approach to biblical history?

It seems we are back at the old clash between the critique of religion and science on the one hand and religion on the other. This, however, is not the case, Strauss holds. In his view, the relationship between the two has changed since the seventeenth century. Indeed, initially there was conflict: "There was a time, not so long ago, when the two powers, tradition and science, did not coexist peacefully on parallel planes, with no points of contact, but engaged in a life-and-death struggle for hegemony on the single plane of the 'truth.'"<sup>46</sup> As Strauss emphasizes again, this struggle was decided in favor of the critique of religion and of science. They confronted religion with the alternative: either adapt to the requirements of science and critique, or face ruin. However, he continues, the adaptation religion submitted to was not so much its own merit as the consequence of the fact that eventually the critique began to criticize itself. The Enlightenment's reflexive turn, which is associated with Immanuel Kant, set limits to reason, and thus created new space for religion.

The latter, nevertheless, paid a high price for this commodity: it was compelled to abandon its claim to transcendence and to truth. The place of transcendence was taken by the transcendental constitution of religious consciousness as a necessary postulate of reason. In the long run, however, it became apparent that "an idealistically reinterpreted religion may perhaps be the most amusing thing in the world, it can in any case no longer be religion."<sup>47</sup> Reduced to a mere postulate, religion could be related to various aspects of human experience, but without the claim to transcendence, it was cut off from the source that nourished and sustained it. At the

end of this development, it became necessary to address this claim anew, this time with regard to the conditions that had been created by the critique of religion and its self-critique. "In a fundamentally different intellectual situation, the problem of theology had to be posed anew, as one that could be dealt with scientifically."<sup>48</sup>

In this way, Strauss brings to light the historical and intellectual background of the problem he himself is struggling with, as it was adumbrated earlier herein: how to do justice to the ancestral Jewish legacy *and* to the criteria of modernity. Meeting this challenge seems to depend on the possibility of developing a scientific approach to the problem of theology. As becomes apparent from Strauss's early writings, such an approach is, in fact, already available. Not without some enthusiasm, he discusses the so-called new theology that emerges in this period. Challenged by the reflexive turn of the Enlightenment, this new theology points to the shortcomings of the modern historical-critical reading of the Bible, and attempts to take the fundamental claims of religion seriously again. Protestant authors such as Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and Rudolf Otto integrate elements of neo-Kantianism, phenomenology, and existentialism in a postcritical exegesis of the Bible, in order to return to the roots of religion. In the case of Barth, this leads to the development of a form of neoorthodoxy, a reflexive return within the folds of tradition, reconnecting with the sources of religious experience.

In his autobiographical writings, Strauss discusses more amply the historical background of the "return movement" (*Rückkehrbewegung*) as it developed within Judaism. With its watchword *t'shuvah*, Hebrew for both "return" and "penitence," it addressed assimilated Jews alienated from the tradition by their upbringing and disappointed in the promises of liberal democracy. Its foundations were laid by Hermann Cohen, whose elaboration of neo-Kantianism had led him back to Judaism.<sup>49</sup> Cohen's impulse was taken up and developed by two of the most important Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century: Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber. Each in his way contributed to what the young Strauss calls "the reconstruction of traditional theology in a situation created by the critique of tradition."<sup>50</sup>

The new Jewish theology rejected the way in which the so-called moderate Jewish Enlightenment of the eighteenth century had tried to salvage Judaism after the attack of the first wave of the radical Enlightenment. The moderates, led by Moses Mendelssohn, had argued that although the radical Enlightenment was justified in refuting the *external* elements of faith in revelation—such as the authority of oral and written tradition, as well as miracles—this did not mean that its *internal* elements had also been refuted. The latter had retained their validity, and had proven impervious to the sci-

entific and historical critique. Inspired by Kantianism and German Idealism, the moderate Enlightenment no longer understood the fundamental tenets of Judaism against the background of an external and material relationship between God and the world. Rather, it "internalized" these tenets as postulates of reason. Thus, revelation was no longer regarded as a *factum brutum* surpassing human reason, but it was transformed into a transcendental "religious *a priori*." Even God himself did not escape this reduction: his external power over the world vanished in favor of the authority of a regulative idea.

According to the return movement, this internalization did more harm than good to Judaism, allowing its contents to evaporate into shadowy precepts without any binding character. The idealist approach liquidated not only the externality of the tradition, but also the immediate human experience of God. With his philosophy of the "I and Thou" (*Ich und Du*), Buber attempted to restore this experience. Against the moderate Enlightenment, he argued that God and revelation are no mere ideas that guide human reason. On the contrary, the divine can only be experienced as an irruption of the absolute that is completely at odds with all human pursuits, expectations, and desires. It has the character of a compelling, anomalistic call, to which man must respond in an unconditional love for God in order to learn to recognize and love his fellow man.

Rosenzweig added to Buber's contribution by pointing out that the individual rediscovery of the immediate experience of God did not suffice to warrant a return to tradition. It was also necessary to be attentive to the traces of this experience that are to be found in the Bible. From his study *Hegel and the State*, Rosenzweig concluded that philosophy in its ultimate form—the Hegelian system—had failed.<sup>51</sup> All arguments the philosophic tradition had mustered against revelation had missed their mark. For this reason, he declared the "old thinking" bankrupt and advocated a "new thinking" (*neues Denken*). Rejecting the idealist quest for the conditions of possibility of experience, he advocated a "radical empiricism" based on the immediate and intuitive experience of three irreducible entities: God, man, and the world. Since it focused on experience, the new thinking was free of the prejudices and reductionisms of traditional philosophy, Rosenzweig argued. For this reason, it was well equipped to guide and accompany the return to Judaism.

According to the young Strauss, the new theology is able to realign science and religion in a way that allows both to assert themselves without compromise, and that permits a fertile interaction. In his early writings he appeals to Hermann Cohen and Rudolf Otto in particular. From Cohen, founder of Marburg neo-Kantianism, he borrows the notion that a rational

and scientific critique of religion is already available in principle within religion itself. As Cohen argues, the founders of Jewish and Christian monotheism, the biblical prophets, waged a permanent battle against the folk religion of their times. They opposed the mythical belief in local deities, which was based on terror, by invoking the infinitely greater and more terrifying omnipotence of God. In opposing this mythical order, they evinced a critical rationalism that is akin to the philosophical critique of myth and religion. Theology, which transmits and interprets the legacy of the prophets, is thus faced with the task of conserving and keeping this critical rationality alive. In Strauss's words: "In the final analysis, scientific critique of religion is an *immanent* critique. It exists already where the term 'science' cannot yet be spoken of in the Scholastic sense. The theologians only continue what the prophets had begun."<sup>52</sup>

The latter holds no less for the new theology. The fact that it uses modern scientific and philosophic insights in no way signifies that it violates religion, Strauss argues together with Cohen. On the contrary, these insights support, conserve, and activate the critical potential inherent in religion. In this way, it also becomes possible to take seriously again the foundations of the Jewish religion: insofar as they too express the original rationalism of the prophets, they can be incorporated in a modern philosophical system without being deformed or evacuated. Cohen's achievement, moreover, is counterbalanced and complemented by the work of Rudolf Otto. In his groundbreaking study *The Holy*, Otto firmly rejects the science of religion of the Enlightenment and its Romantic heirs.<sup>53</sup> Against the naturalist account of religion as well as against the transcendental constitution of religious consciousness, he reminds theology of its proper name: its primary subject is not the world, nor man nor religious experience, but God in his transcendence.<sup>54</sup> Otto thus understands divine transcendence radically, independently of man and the world. The holy is the numen, the radically Other that in its mysterious strangeness instills fear because it escapes human control. It is Otto's great merit, Strauss argues, that he deliberately develops his thesis with a view to the modern context: "Otto operates with categories that are useful for the reconstruction of traditional theology in a situation created by the critique of tradition."<sup>55</sup> The specifically modern character of Otto's theology becomes apparent in his identification of the numinous with the irrational, as the central characteristic of the religious object:

In an earlier day, in a world filled by the irrational moment of religion, it was necessary for theology to achieve recognition for the legitimacy



of the rational. Today, in a spiritual reality dominated by *ratio*, it is the office of theology to bring to life for our era "the irrational in the idea of the Divine" through the medium of the theoretical consciousness.<sup>56</sup>

The fact that transcendence is equated with the irrational does not preclude a rational, scientific theology, Strauss argues. Rather to the contrary: precisely because he draws attention to the irrational, Otto is compelled to reaffirm the place and the role of rationality. This he does by revisiting the medieval doctrine of attributes, the characteristics ascribed to God by man. By understanding the irrational as the bearer of rational attributes, Otto rehabilitates the inherent rationality of human speech about God. For this reason, Strauss stresses, his theology is particularly valuable for Judaism, especially with regard to an adequate relationship to its biblical and ritual tradition. This tradition, he argues, "makes available to us the most perfect expression that the substance of the religious object could possibly find 'in human language.'"<sup>57</sup> Otto's postcritical theology may thus enable modern Jews to read the Bible anew, as a testament of transcendence. Aided by the reconstituted doctrine of attributes, moreover, it allows them to trace the rationality underlying the traditional conception of God.

Just as Cohen's theology makes it possible to integrate traditional Jewish content within a modern philosophical and scientific framework, Otto's work enables us to honor the foundations of the Jewish religion without forsaking the legacy of the European critique of religion. In this sense, the new theology of Cohen and Otto is the necessary supplement to Dubnow's critical reading of biblical history, aimed at promoting the political awareness of modern Jews. Combined, they constitute the means by which political Zionism can relate to the Jewish tradition in a way that meets the criteria of modernity. Politics and theology each receive their due against a common postcritical background: this, we can infer, is the solution Strauss tries to develop in his first publications for the Jewish Question, understood as a theological-political problem.

Conspicuous in Strauss's youthful interest in the new theology is that it attaches far greater importance to Hermann Cohen than to either Franz Rosenzweig or Martin Buber, even though the latter two had eclipsed Cohen in the 1920s. Presumably, Strauss judged Cohen's thought to be more original and more akin to his own radical understanding of religion. This, at any rate, is what we can infer from his later autobiographical reminiscences. As he explains there, he found that none of the thinkers of *t'shuva* truly succeeded in finding a way back: either there was no genuine return, or what was arrived at was not Jewish religion. The latter reproach

is aimed especially against Buber's work. Because Buber gives priority to the immediate experience of God, biblical texts are no more than the human expression or interpretation of a divine call that is absolute, speechless, and literally "inhuman." Moreover, Buber generalizes this characteristic by regarding the various world religions as different interpretations or expressions of this experience. In his view, no interpretation is better than any other in capturing and expressing the experience of absolute alterity. As a result, Strauss observes, not only Buber's own philosophy of "I and Thou" but Judaism as well is reduced to being a mere interpretation. In this way, however, Buber loses sight of the specificity of Judaism. For instance, he one-sidedly emphasizes the *tremendum*-character of the experience of the divine. As a result, faith becomes an attitude characterized by the total absence of support, when expectation abides in "the opened abyss of the final insecurity," the terrifying moment of what Buber calls "the eclipse of God" (*Gottesfinsternis*).<sup>58</sup> Thus, he forgets that the Jewish prophets do not only express their experience of the divine in terrifying abyssal visions. They also offer comforting predictions of the ultimate victory of divine justice and messianic restoration, and thus an absolute certainty.

By concentrating exclusively on the experience of the divine, moreover, Buber neglects another aspect of Jewish tradition, Strauss finds. One of the central claims of traditional Judaism is that the fate of the Jews evinces a mysterious and privileged relationship to the absolute. This relationship is not regarded as one of many possible interpretations, but as the result of an indubitable divine promise. Buber was unable to take this claim seriously, at least any more seriously than similar claims of other religions. As a result of his single-minded focus on the experience of the divine, he refused to have his faith in revelation "tainted" by any orthodoxy, attempting to revive Judaism by concentrating on elements traditionally held to be secondary, such as Hasidic tales. Regarding the primary elements, he continued to harbor strong reservations.

According to Strauss, similar reservations attached to Rosenzweig's concept of *t'shuvah*. In his case as well, the medium of return proved to be more important than the destination. According to Rosenzweig, return to tradition by means of "a leap of faith" was both dangerous and bound to fail. On the basis of his radical empiricism, he argued that a successful attempt to return had to take as focal point the actual experience of the alienated modern Jew. Although Strauss agrees with this focus, he draws a different conclusion from it: if experience is indeed the starting point, the modern Jew has no other choice than to leap back into faith or, more precisely, into the revealed law:

[W]hen speaking of the Jewish experience, one must start from what is primary or authoritative for the Jewish consciousness, and not from what is the primary condition of possibility of the Jewish experience: one must start from God's Law, the Torah, and not from the Jewish nation.<sup>59</sup>

According to Strauss, Rosenzweig was unable to meet his own requirements. His concept of "experience" remained indebted to the modern concept of the individual, which originated in opposition to the traditional religious understanding. In the light of the latter, his distinction between immediate contemporary experience and what was handed down by tradition had little importance: from the point of view of orthodox faith, experience always takes place within a continuum sustained by the authority of the revealed law. An individual's biography cannot be dissociated from faith, since it derives its sense and meaning from faith. For Rosenzweig, however, the revealed law was secondary to the Jewish people: it is the product of the common descent of the Jewish people, as it were, a cultural densification of its turbulent history.

Yet tradition teaches the reverse, Strauss rejoins: according to the Pentateuch, the Jewish people were unified as the chosen people only as a result of the revelation of God's law. Upholding the primacy of experience therefore does not require the preliminary affirmation of the national sentiment or the national spirit, but obedience to the law in its entire traditional rigor. On this point, however, Rosenzweig had fundamental reservations. He conceived of law and tradition as a reservoir from which the individual could draw elements that would assist and guide his return. Strauss strongly objects to this approach: "The sacred law, as it were the public temple, which was a reality, thus becomes a potential, a quarry, or a store-house out of which each individual takes the materials for building his private shelter."<sup>60</sup> That this approach is based on an implicit denial of the divine origin is exemplified by the ambivalence of Rosenzweig's neoorthodoxy toward traditional orthodoxy—he always opposed the orthodox legalist approach to the law. In his view, the Torah was a mirror in which the individual's inner experience of God could recognize itself, just as it could recognize itself in other elements of tradition. Concurrently, in his reading of the Bible he emphasized commandments over the prohibitions that are central in the orthodox view. Similarly, Rosenzweig was very reluctant regarding the miracles reported in the Bible. His faith in miracles developed very slowly, always attended and tested by the "new thinking" and its focus on immediate experience. Within orthodoxy, this reluctance is absent, Strauss points out: an omnipotent and inscrutable

creator is an undeniable guarantee for the authenticity of all recorded miracles. Every form of doubt is regarded as a weakness of faith, which should be independent of one's personal situation.

Rosenzweig's selective approach and his emphasis on the free individual intercourse with the tradition derived from a historicization of the Torah, conditioned by modern premises like individualism and liberalism. For this reason, Strauss argues, he was no more able than Buber to accept the rigorous externality of the revealed law as a whole. Although both thinkers opposed the "internalizations" of the moderate Jewish Enlightenment, in fact they carried out a similar transformation. They reconstituted the externality of revelation in the experience of the *tremendum*—bypassing the law—in order to reinternalize it as the object of a free individual quest. From the perspective of the latter, the law and other elements of tradition were only a sounding board at the disposal of the "homecomers" (*Heimkehrer*). This helps explain why, in his early writings, Strauss maintained a critical distance with regard to both Rosenzweig and Buber in his attempt to balance post-critical theology and political Zionism.

### *Quaestio Iuris: The Legacy of Spinoza*

The project, however, never gets past this first step, and is never systematically elaborated. After 1925, both Dubnow and the new theologians disappear completely from Strauss's writings, as does the attempt to do justice to both the Jewish content and political Zionism. What is more, political Zionism itself gradually recedes into the background. When Strauss broaches the subject again in writing in 1932, he can be seen to be taking leave of his youthful commitment, a process that is officially brought to a conclusion in 1935, as we will see. For all purposes, his initial enterprise seems to be a closed chapter.

Whence this remarkable change? Why does Strauss abandon his project even before it has begun to get off the ground? The most important reason is that gradually its fundamental presupposition has become doubtful. This presupposition, it will be remembered, was that the "European critique," the critique of religion, had effected a profound and irrevocable change in the situation of Judaism. Its success ushered in the end of *galut* and the beginning of emancipation and assimilation, initiating a process that eventually would lead to political Zionism on the one hand and the new theology on the other. In his contributions to the Zionist self-assessment of the 1920s, in his efforts to take religion seriously and in his debates with cultural and religious Zionism as well as with Jewish orthodoxy, Strauss never ceases

to press this point: modern Judaism cannot ignore or escape the legacy of the critique of religion, modern science, and modern politics.

This does not mean, however, that he simply sides with "Europe." When he discusses the way in which Europe effectively and radically affected the closed world of *galut*, he does so with the intention of determining both the point and the scope of this impact as accurately as possible. In several of his early publications, he warns against the uncritical application of modern scientific theories to the problems of Judaism. Such attempts, he argues, can only further jeopardize the situation of modern Jews. Instead, one must time and again ask the question, with what right does one transfer elements from the European context to the Jewish context? Or, more emphatically, "Of what concern is Europe to us as Jews!" (*Was geht uns als Juden Europa an!*)<sup>61</sup> According to Strauss, this *Rechtsfrage* or *quaestio iuris*, the question regarding the legitimacy of contact between the two spheres, is nothing less than "the central problem of our spiritual situation."<sup>62</sup> Hence, his answer is actually intended to be restrictive: the success of the critique of religion is, in fact, the *only* point on which there has been any legitimate contact between Europe and Judaism.

An important implication of this restriction is that the legitimacy of political Zionism, like that of assimilation, is made essentially dependent on the pertinence and the legitimacy of the critique of religion, more specifically on the fact that "this critique *made an impact on* the Jewish context."<sup>63</sup> Precisely this "fact" becomes increasingly doubtful to Strauss in the course of the 1920s. Apparently, the tension underlying his uncompromising understanding of both political Zionism *and* Jewish religion became ever harder to uphold. To estimate the importance of this event, we do well to turn to the autobiographical preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. As he explains there, the problems attendant to both Zionism and the new theology and its qualified return to tradition proved to be of such a magnitude that he eventually came to wonder "whether an unqualified return to Jewish orthodoxy was not both possible and necessary—was not at the same time the solution to the problem of the Jew lost in the non-Jewish world and the only course compatible with sheer consistency or intellectual probity."<sup>64</sup> Similarly, in a lecture of 1932, he notes, "The possibility emerged that European reservations vis-à-vis the Jewish tradition were no longer at all possible and necessary: Judaism *in its entirety* (*das integrale Judentum*) appeared to become possible again."<sup>65</sup>

As the early writings show, however, the young Strauss is not prepared to make this momentous decision without further ado. Before taking this step, he considers it his first and foremost duty to revisit the one genuine

obstacle to an unqualified return to orthodoxy, the obstacle that is at the same time the basis of his own youthful commitment: the critique of religion. What this entails can already be inferred from his very first publication, where he draws attention to “the role *Spinoza* plays in the formulation of the modern view of the world and the modern view of the state.”<sup>66</sup> For how else could the critique of religion engage in a “life-and-death struggle for hegemony on the single plane of the ‘truth’” other than with a *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, a theological-political treatise?<sup>67</sup> Spinoza was the first to attack the authority of revealed religion by offering a systematic and scientific analysis of the Bible in order to disengage theological claims to truth and political claims to power. His critique provided the groundwork for the antireligious attack of the Enlightenment, as well as for the development of modern biblical science.<sup>68</sup> More importantly, the critical shockwaves of the *Theological-Political Treatise* also affected the Jewish religion and the ancient vault of the *galut*.

This does not exhaust Spinoza’s significance for Judaism, however. As Strauss points out, in the final chapters of the *Treatise* he designed a political model that is generally regarded as a prototype of modern liberal democracy, a secular society based on individual freedom.<sup>69</sup> In Spinoza’s model, citizenship was open to all, and hence also to Jews. On the basis of his critique of the Bible, Spinoza had concluded that Mosaic Law was no longer effective. As a result, nothing could prevent the Jews from abandoning their old world and participating in European culture.<sup>70</sup> In this respect, Strauss argues, the *Theological-Political Treatise* can be regarded as the founding document of Jewish assimilation:

When what mattered was the justification of the breakup of the Jewish tradition and the entry of the Jews into modern Europe, perhaps no better, but certainly no more convenient, reference offered itself than the appeal to Spinoza. Who was more suitable for undertaking the justification of modern Judaism before the tribunal of the Jewish tradition, on the one hand, and before the tribunal of modern Europe, on the other, than Spinoza, who, as was almost universally recognized, was a classical exponent of this Europe?<sup>71</sup>

But even this does not yet sufficiently capture Spinoza’s importance for modern Judaism, Strauss warns. In the third chapter of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza wrote of his orthodox Jewish contemporaries: “If the foundations of their religion did not effeminate their minds, I would certainly believe that they will at some time, given the occasion—so changeable are human affairs—establish their state again, and that God may elect them

again."<sup>72</sup> With irony bordering on sarcasm, Spinoza intimates that the possibility of a restoration of the Jewish state primarily depended on the readiness to forfeit the fundamental principles of Jewish religion, which he held responsible for the precarious isolation of Jews in the first place. The view that Jewish suffering under *galut* had a supernatural ground, and the strongly ritualized way of life based on it, reflected and consolidated a fatal lack of political organization. According to Spinoza, the Jews had to free themselves from the stranglehold of tradition by means of a sober, critical reading of the Bible.

Hence, Strauss observes, the *Theological-Political Treatise* is the birth certificate not only of assimilation, but also of political Zionism. In spite of—or perhaps owing to—his irony, Spinoza was the first to anticipate the possibility of a purely political solution of the Jewish Question.<sup>73</sup> He detached the restoration and self-preservation of the Jewish people from its traditional divine guarantee, and made it entirely dependent on a purely human, political effort.<sup>74</sup> As is well known, Spinoza paid a high price for his critical position. The orthodox Jewish community of Amsterdam pronounced a *herem*, a ruling of total excommunication, against him, after which he led a solitary and withdrawn existence.

The irony of history, however, seems to have followed that of the philosopher, who subsequently came to be known as one of the founders, not only of modernity, but also of Jewish modernity. All of the central characteristics of the modern Jewish condition point to Spinoza's work: not only the break with tradition and assimilation, but also political Zionism and modern theology ultimately derive their legitimacy from the success of his critique of religion. However, Strauss rejoins, the fact that a critique is successful does not yet mean that it is justified and well founded. Being victorious in a life-and-death struggle does not yet prove that victory was deserved. On the contrary, if on closer examination the critique should prove to be unfounded, to what extent can it be called successful? This question can be answered only by means of a careful investigation of the foundations and the effectiveness of Spinoza's critique of religion. Only such an investigation can answer the *quaestio iuris* and thus also the crucial question whether an unqualified return to Jewish orthodoxy is imperative. Strauss notes tersely in the autobiographical preface, "Orthodoxy could be returned to only if Spinoza was wrong in every respect."<sup>75</sup>

With this programmatic assertion, Strauss also indicates how far he had moved away from the return movement of Buber and Rosenzweig. The main reason for their inability to return unconditionally under the authority of the law is that they remained beholden to the basic premises of the Enlightenment, he submits. Rosenzweig's critique of traditional philosophy was

mainly a rejection of Hegel's idealist synthesis between religion and Enlightenment. By rejecting this synthesis, he intended to clear the path for the "new thinking." According to Strauss, however, this reasoning was insufficient in order to justify a blanket farewell to the "old thinking," let alone a return to religion:

It was believed that one could dismiss any direct and thematic discussion with the Enlightenment, since it was assumed—logically, in the sense of the "overcome" Hegelianism—that with the "overcoming" of Hegelianism one had simultaneously "overcome" the Enlightenment which Hegelianism had "transcended." In truth, however, the critique of Hegelianism had actually led, in the nature of the case, to a rehabilitation of the Enlightenment.<sup>76</sup>

In developing their new theology, the advocates of *t'shuvah* wrongly assumed that a dismissal of the Hegelian synthesis necessarily entails the rejection of its constitutive parts. Rather, Strauss argues, if one rejects the synthesis, both constitutive parts are actually restored and thus also the tension that existed between them before they were "sublated." This means that both religion and Enlightenment reappear in their "life-and-death struggle for hegemony on the one plane of the 'truth.'"<sup>77</sup> In this sense, Buber and Rosenzweig were too hasty. The main obstacle to be overcome in order to return to Jewish religion in its original sense is not the idealist internalization but the Enlightenment critique, which had been aimed exclusively against religion in its rigorous, external sense. For this reason, Strauss concludes that although "Jewish theology was resurrected from a deep slumber" by Rosenzweig, his one-sided identification of philosophy with Hegelianism prevented him from advancing to a deeper level, that of the original conflict between radical Enlightenment and revealed religion.<sup>78</sup> Had he done so, Strauss implies, he would have found that the avowed victory of the former and the defeat of the latter must be reconsidered. Why occupy oneself with a new theology beholden to Spinoza's critique of religion, when in fact this critique itself is in need of scrutiny? Thus, what began as a contribution to the self-reflection of postwar political Zionism now leads to an inquiry into the foundations of European and Jewish modernity. As a theological-political problem, the Jewish Question proves to possess a complexity that requires us to return to the origins of modernity.