

**Sharon Portnoff**

*Reason and Revelation Before Historicism: Strauss and Fackenheim.*

Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2011.

368 pages

\$70.00 (cloth ISBN 978-144264307-9)

The idea of dedicating a book to a dialogue or debate between the thought of Leo Strauss and that of Emil Fackenheim is such an excellent one that it is surprising that it hasn't been done before. There have been articles dedicated to this task. In fact, Strauss and Fackenheim, who knew and respected one another (indeed, Fackenheim considers Strauss one of his teachers) commented upon one another's intellectual projects, if only briefly. What is so valuable about the enterprise is that it opens up the possibility of a real debate between Strauss's efforts to recover an ahistorical philosophical stance and Fackenheim's historicist or "qualified historicist" (as Portnoff characterizes it) recovery of a living Judaism as a debate internal to twentieth-century Jewish thought. Portnoff does us a tremendous service in laying out the basic groundwork for such an encounter with a careful and generally sound interpretation of each of the two thinkers, together with a lucid analysis of their points of difference. However, I want to suggest that her very care and respect for the two thinkers also inhibits her in pushing their positions so that a debate between them can really yield insight into the underlying issue that separates Strauss and Fackenheim.

As Portnoff indicates, while there is much that does separate the two thinkers, they are able to respect and engage in dialogue with one another because they also begin with a common concern. Strauss and Fackenheim, though separated in birth by nearly two decades, shared a common background as intellectual Jews in Weimar Germany. For both, their existential condition as Jews was revelatory of something fundamentally problematic at the heart of Weimar Germany's promise of a liberal modern state in which, in principle, Jews could find a place after centuries of persecution and exclusion. Both Strauss and Fackenheim found in their shared situation a capacity for insight into not just what was problematic in Weimar Germany, but indeed in secularizing modernity in general. Both came to develop thoughtful and powerful critiques of modernity and to see starkly its blindnesses and capacities for self-delusion. However, each thinker responded differently to their analogous experiences. For Strauss, the only way forward was through a thoroughgoing rejection of modernity and all its effects (above all historicism) through a recovery of ancient philosophy as a permanently available standpoint. The release from modern rationality through the recovery of pre-modern rationality simultaneously made available to Strauss the standpoint of a revelation unencumbered by syntheses with reason. Fackenheim, by contrast, although inspired by Strauss's gesture of recovery of the pre-modern, stayed with modernity and historicism, even while contesting their standpoints as complete or comprehensive.

Leo Strauss is a notoriously divisive figure: he often seems to evoke either polemical opposition or uncritical respect. The commentary on Strauss has been improving markedly in the last number of years and there are now some excellent accounts of his thought. However, Portnoff's project promises a particularly valuable way into what is perhaps most compelling and defining in Strauss's position, his anti-historicism. A real debate between Fackenheim and

Strauss could have really helped clarify this question. Equally, while Fackenheim is not as commented upon a figure, a powerful debate could also have pressed a little more firmly upon the stability of Fackenheim's efforts to secure a transcendental standpoint, a divine standpoint beyond history, while also affirming a certain kind of existential historicism. However, before turning to what could have strengthened Portnoff's book, let us look at what she does give us.

Portnoff tells us of her own conclusion to the debate: "I will suggest that, while Strauss's Jewish thought – as indeed all Jewish thought – should be included in the reconstruction of Jewish categories, Fackenheim's model of committed openness, notwithstanding the criticism leveled against it, is the model better suited for Jewish thought – indeed Strauss himself suggests this – at least for the moment. Paradoxically, it may be that, if Fackenheim's project were to succeed – if he were to sustain Jewish faith through this moment in history – it would be possible for Jews to rediscover a theoretic model more closely resembling Strauss's" (35). Portnoff's standard here is what contributes to "Jewish thought," not what is true. Her language and standard of judgment point to a certain kind of fusion of the theoretical and practical, one that, as she herself notes, belongs to a modern and indeed largely historicist standpoint. The measure is the future of a certain human activity and what might best support it (and presumably the Jewish faith it is to serve in helping to sustain), not its rational consistency or interpretive power or truthfulness or fidelity to Judaism. But then rather than adopt Fackenheim's standpoint *holus bolus*, Portnoff invokes Strauss's position as a future possible model without really testing intellectually how it would emerge on the basis of the success of Fackenheim as a model. In turn, the recommendation of a future turn to Strauss oddly suggests that Portnoff's support of Fackenheim is only temporary or strategic, given where contemporary Jewish thought and Jewish belief is, but that ultimate validity lies in Strauss's standpoint.

What is central to Strauss's thought is the claim that the release from modern rationality reveals an abiding and unsurpassable distinction between Athens and Jerusalem. It belongs to modernity to confuse the standpoints of Athens and Jerusalem. The excellence of the pre-modern tradition, above all the thought of Maimonides according to Strauss, is that it preserved the distinction between Athens and Jerusalem, even while appearing to bring them together. So the Judaism Strauss points to, without being committed to, is of one that precedes all "compromises" with modernity. Portnoff, then, seems by her invocation of a post-Fackenheimian Strauss to be precisely remaining with Strauss's judgment upon efforts to connect Judaism and modernity (such as Fackenheim's): they remain a resting spot for contemporary Jews, but not a legitimate final destination.

Portnoff comes to this somewhat confusing conclusion by a set of careful steps. There is much to recommend such care: it is a challenge, in spite of their shared backgrounds, to get Strauss and Fackenheim to connect, so wide-ranging are their intellectual disagreements. The book consists of five chapters: an introductory one, then one chapter each providing expository accounts of Strauss's and Fackenheim's thought which come to focus on their respective relations to the history of Jewish thought. Then, the crucial chapter on historicism, in which the two positions come into debate with one another. Finally, a fifth chapter explores the implications of their disagreement, above all through the theme of Jerusalem and Athens. There are extensive and very valuable notes collected at the end of the volume. In all of this, Portnoff explores a number of points of contact and of debate between Strauss and Fackenheim, but in the

end she shows little interest in trying to either show one position true and the other false or alternatively move us beyond these positions. Strauss's and Fackenheim's positions remain largely unaffected by the whole account: they can apparently be adopted one after the other as circumstances vary in the development of Jewish thought.

This is where Portnoff's respect for the two thinkers actually gets in the way of a greater respect, that of a real intellectual engagement with the positions so that they are not left unaffected. How might this happen? By not letting Strauss's or Fackenheim's claims remain uncontested. For instance, Portnoff herself points out that Strauss's account of what he is doing – recovering pre-modern philosophy, above all that of Plato – has been contested, and indeed contested by Fackenheim. Fackenheim suggests that Strauss's thought belongs to the “New Thinking” that arose in Weimar Germany (for Strauss and Fackenheim, this had its greatest realization in Franz Rosenzweig) and is not a form of the old pre-modern thinking. Portnoff points out that Fackenheim seeks to engage in a metaphysical tradition that for Strauss is only exoteric. These concerns, if pressed, would contest the validity of Strauss's whole project. Does and can Strauss, in fact, recover a pre-modernity, when he accepts the anti-metaphysical premises of the “New Thinking”? Could it be that Fackenheim's standpoint, insofar as it is informed by idealist metaphysics, is the surer guide to the history of philosophy right back to the ancients?

Equally, it may be that Strauss may provide a crucial corrective to Fackenheim's account of Judaism. Portnoff presents Strauss as respectful of revelation, while uncommitted to it. For Portnoff, Strauss is, even in his adherence to Athens, a “theist”. While a very respectable position in the world of Strauss scholarship, this is not uncontested, and it tends to blunt the opposition between Athens and Jerusalem in Portnoff's account of Strauss. Still, Portnoff does see the basic point that, for Strauss, for Jerusalem to be seen unadorned, we need to step back from Athens, not only strive to assimilate it. This is a devastating criticism of Fackenheim's whole project, which is one of recovering Judaism through an existential (largely Schelling-inspired) historicism. Fackenheim can certainly be accused of reading Judaism too easily through the category of “history,” even while trying to escape the radical historicism of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Fackenheim was certainly aware of this issue and wrestled with it throughout his scholarly career. In the end, could it be said that for Fackenheim the notion of a “living Judaism” has put too much an emphasis on the adjective? Strauss emphasizes the priority of divine revelation, at least in its Jewish form, to all human interpretations and above all any assimilation to the standpoint of a historicizing existentialism, however qualified.

Portnoff is aware of such tensions in the debate between Strauss and Fackenheim, but she doesn't press them to challenge their basic positions or actually seek to transform them by the aid of such criticisms. This is where it can seem that Portnoff's interest is in recovering both accounts for the sake of “Jewish thought” and not for the sake of what is true or intellectually sustainable. Indeed, Portnoff, in my judgment, understates the depth of the opposition between Strauss and Fackenheim by trying to find areas of agreement that they share only in a very vague or general sense, often misstating one thinker's account by putting it in terms of the other. Portnoff is certainly right that Strauss and Fackenheim had criticisms of modern thought and its tendency to secular imminent worldliness, especially as evidenced by a radical or total historicism. In this, both Strauss and Fackenheim, are, in their different ways, products of the

“New Thinking.” Both find in their Jewishness a specific route to engage in that new thinking through acts of recovery. However, even in their apparent agreement there are crucial differences. As soon as we try to state what is wrong with modernity or indeed what modernity is in Strauss and Fackenheim, therefore, we are immediately in very different worlds. (Here Portnoff tends to assimilate Strauss to Fackenheim.) Fackenheim accepts an account of modernity that ties it to Christianity, and the kind of radical immanentization of God that is found there. But this is not Strauss’s account at all. For Strauss modernity is not above all a religiously informed moment that can be religiously corrected; it is for Strauss a work of philosophy – indeed atheistic political philosophy – that can be escaped only through philosophy. On other occasions, Portnoff tends to assimilate Fackenheim to Strauss, treating Jerusalem and Athens as permanent alternatives, when for Fackenheim they are always already historically informed stances, even in their differences. Indeed, beyond their different conceptions of “modernity” or “Athens and Jerusalem,” one could ask whether they mean the same thing by “revelation,” by “reason,” or by “historicism” – just to mention the terms in the title to Portnoff’s book. All of this needs more rigorous analysis.

What is the result of this blurring of the differences between Strauss and Fackenheim? Instead of a genuine and transformative debate, we are left with a somewhat confused muddle, as if there can be a stance that can affirm both standpoints, even if in succession. But this is false. Fackenheim’s historicism, while qualified by a recovery of divine transcendence is thoroughgoing, not in the sense that all beings are historical, but that all human being is and so is all human experience, whether of reason or of revelation. This means that Strauss’s recovery of the permanent problems, of natural right, is itself historical. It is an entirely contemporary event, a form of the “New Thinking.” Strauss has not recovered the activity he claims to have done. Equally for Strauss, Fackenheim’s engagement in historicist existentialism means that even as he recovers a sense of fidelity to Jewish belief, a sense of transcendence in and for contemporary Judaism, this faithful recovery is at the same time betrayal. So Fackenheim has not recovered what he claimed that he had. So where Portnoff seeks to accentuate certain overlaps, certain agreements between Strauss and Fackenheim, I would encourage a more radical opposition, so that the power and consistency of both authors’ thought can be more vitally engaged with. It seems to me, an outsider, that this is a vital debate that would most helpfully sustain the future of Jewish thought.

**Neil G. Robertson**

University of King’s College