Some thoughts on the Importance of Leo Strauss

Strauss is well recognized for his characterization of the secret dynamic of the western tradition within the poles of what he called “Athens and Jerusalem.” Matthew Arnold and Isaac Husik had preferred to call this secret vitality of the western tradition “Hebraism and Hellenism.” The tensions between Jerusalem and Athens for Strauss was unsatisfactorily resolved by Nietzsche in the “ubermentsch” to unite the body of Caesar with the soul of Jesus.” For Strauss only Maimonides reconciled this tension adequately by seeking to harmonize science (Athens) with divinely revealed religion - Jerusalem. In fact Strauss recuperates a Maimonides who is able to justify the truth claims of revealed religion before the tribunal of philosophy or reason. Strauss returned to the medieval Enlightenment of Maimonides over the modern Enlightenment for Maimonides reveals how the deepest human desire i.e. for eternity in search for the truth, or G-d throughout the human life which is best grounded in quest for the divine, for only the divine is infinite. Strauss identified in Maimonides the Rambam’s recognition of eternal verities true for all persons at all times, permanent things such as moral virtue, the difference between right and wrong, the soul and its proper order, the true needs of the mind to fulfill an examined life (Socrates had proclaimed the unexamined life not worth living), philosophy or love of wisdom as a way of life, and the supra-political outside of historical contingencies. Strauss sought to enlarge the vision in both mind and heart of what it is to be a human being irrespective of historical epoch, even while understanding that philosophy as quest for an account of the “whole” would need to fortify itself with historical knowledge and religious thought. Strauss wrestled with the apparent conflicts between Judaism and philosophy (science) by re-raising the age long eternal questions of medieval philosophy, such as “What is creation, prophecy, providence, moral virtue, etc.” For Strauss only philosophy has the chance to replace opinions about G-d that are usually false or only accidentally true, with genuine knowledge of G-d, world, and man via negative theology etc.

Yet Strauss was concerned about the well-being of society and thus championed the rebirth of political philosophy and the role of the philosopher in society and hence of esotericism of the dynamic between thought and the republic. Strauss warned of the risks of the threat to freedom of thought in contemporary society which has known totalitarianism in Nazi Europe and Stalinist Russia. Strauss comments, “Freedom of thought is being menaced in our time more than for several centuries, we have not only the right but even the duty to explain the teaching of Maimonides in order to contribute a better understanding of what freedom of thought means, i.e. what attitude it presupposes and what sacrifices it requires.” Strauss opened up a new avenue against the scholarly consensus as illustrated by Julius Guttman that Maimonides was obviously an “Aristotelian” by suggesting that in the final analysis Maimonides was a Platonist. Strauss himself was clearly a Platonist when at his funeral the Hallel was recited as if to say this world of olam ha-zeh, the world of gashmius, is Egypt, and once the soul was freed from this world of materiality it experienced a freedom as celebratory to recite Hallel at the levaya.

As is clear from Maimonides writings he viewed his era as passing through grave intellectual decline and thus like Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi when he wrote down the Mishnah around 210 CE he had to break the law (writing down the secrets of ma’aseh bereshit and ma’aseh merkavah which were supposed to be transmitted orally) in order to save the law. Rambam thought his world was in
serious need of correction, and he would be the one to transmit to the next generations those esoteric teachings that risked being lost. Strauss like Glatzer viewed the Guide of Maimonides as the supreme esoteric work. While Rambam composed a pirush al ha Mishnah; the mishneh torah, a series of Iggerot to named correspondents on topics such as astrology, conversion, martyrdom, messiahs and Jewish history, it was the Guide which is the supreme crowning achievement of the Rambam composed in a series of letters to his star pupil Yosef who was forced to be distant from his teacher geographically. In this work Rambam sought to transmit to Yosef the secrets of the bible as understood by esoteric Rabbinic exegesis. Strauss asked on Maimonides Guide, “What is the philosophic, cognitive, or intellectual cause and significance of the diversity of literary expression by Maimonides - i.e. how did Maimonides intentionally contradict himself by revealing in order to conceal from the masses, ad captum vulgi, n’importe qui/the hoi polio, and conceal in order to reveal, surrounding his truths in the paradox of enigma? Strauss shed light on why Maimonides and other philosophers leave the secret nature of their teachings concealed for those who are not suited for their comprehension and why philosophers as a matter of political philosophy will not damage or mislead the many or those who will be harmed by hearing the shocking truth. Strauss asked “Why did Maimonides choose to write so “Jewish” a book on a apparently philosophic issues and themes in the wake of Aristotle? Strauss conceived the key modality of philosophy in part as questioning which is the piety of thought and thus inquired along such lines: What is Philosophy? What is Jewish philosophy? What is a philosopher as a rare human possibility? What is the philosopher’s relation to the republic or society in which he lives? Is philosophy different from religion, and if so how? What are the attributes of G-d according to philosophy- quid sit deus? How is the philosopher different from the statesman? Do philosophic thoughts that are eternally true transcend what Richard Rorty called the contingencies of time and place? Strauss held that philosophers were exceedingly rare and far in between and if we ever were to encounter one in our lifetimes that would not be “common.” Strauss thus considered Maimonides not only as a historical figure who reconciled the “science of his time with Torah” but a perennial thinker that transcends the historical period, his geographical locations, his linguistic usage in Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic, and his cultural milieu. These aspects are not unimportant for understanding Rambam, however they may be a starting point and not the final step. Moshe Halbertal in his recent book on Maimonides would disagree, affirming that insights into the Rambam derive specifically from the Rambam’s own lived experiences in flight for instance from the fanatical Almhohads, and later witness to the decadence of the Sultan’s palace retinue in Cairo Fostat. For Strauss however to obtain beyond the horizon of thought to an eternal consciousness of the glimmering of eternity Strauss felt philosophy as a discipline was more equipped than historicism with its tendency towards microscopic annotation. This separates Strauss’ work in part from that of Julius Guttman, Isaac Husik, and Harry Austen Wolfson, who conceived of themselves as historians and historians of ideas. Strauss not only incorporated historical knowledge and data into informing his thought but took on the persona of recuperating a fundamental understanding of what philosophy is, and how this consciousness of what philosophy is, may have been lost to the moderns. Strauss wanted his students to learn not just “About” history but “from philosophers.” Strauss also considered the medieval enlightenment superior to the modern enlightenment with its dogmatic miss belief in “progress.” Strauss was a refugee from Nazi Europe and a century that gassed human beings by the latest techniques in engineering and then burned their bodies in the names of efficiency which to Strauss made progress seem like a farce, as indicated by his book on
Spinoza’s Critique of Religion, whereby Spinoza “was all the rage” for modern enlightenment Jews in Weimar. Maimonides was the key to return us to a more eternal truth, for as a thinker Maimonides wrestled with the eternal questions of philosophy and religious thought. Strauss believed that medieval philosophy taught the “truth” while modern philosophy has lost sight of the truth. Strauss insisted however that no era was necessarily closer to the truth merely by its period in history for the truth, that is to say G-d and his attributes exists eternally irrespective if human beings can intimate Him and his Being. It is the great thinkers of which Maimonides was the exemplar who demonstrate the integrity of thinking by their ability to give a reasonable account of the truth by addressing the eternal perplexities that arise not only in history (Machiavelli who Strauss calls the teacher of evil, did that) but by a thinking not determined by historical context, although history is a preliminary aspect of beginning to understand their situation. That is to say Strauss emphasized the radical character of all great thinkers, which often led to persecution of their thought, out of the many’s hatred for the truth and politicization of intellectual ideas as an agenda, axe to grind, or ideology as revealed in Strauss’ students’ book, the Closing of the American Mind, by Alan Bloom. Strauss was not interested in worshiping idolatrously great thinkers, but learning from them, as radical thinkers. For Strauss thinkers like Maimonides give us an example of intellectual integrity and honesty in the search for truth, a model for the intellectually intrepid and those not afraid to deal with new ideas that might contradict their particular circumstances. Strauss urged readers to return to original questions, to rethink their necessity and hence fostered awareness of eternal problems in an age that he felt had lost sight of the forest for the trees.

Philosophy for Strauss is the possibility of a life in search of truth, and a life devoted to uncovering the truth, and trying to know it. Whether we conceive this quest in an Aristotelian vein as demarcation and classification of eternal order for the foundational causes of all things, or as Plato to hear the monologues of the great minds in dialogue with others, thereby discrediting the misconstruction of philosophy as a mere playing of a game in the mind, or a game with words. Strauss understood that understanding itself, noesis noesis, transcended the merely rhetorical and the stakes were much higher than those derived from gaming. Nonetheless than the redemption of the soul was at stake, a life redeemed or a life not redeemed by thinking. Strauss asked, ‘What is a human being? What constitutes the examined life? What is human life for? What is the best human life? What is its perfection? Is philosophy capable of leading us to the truth, as the comprehensive truth about being, a vision of the “whole”? And is the way of life which leads to such truth also the best way of life for human beings whose souls are not “turned” philosophically? Is man in need of a decisive supplement related to morality, which can only be found in revealed religion? How can revealed religion prove its truth claims before the tribunal of reason? Can the philosophic life, the life led in search of a rational coherent truth, provide a basis for human happiness and the fulfillment of perfection or with Koheleth are we forced to conclude with much searching for wisdom there is much pain, misery, and suffering? Is man in need of assistance from beyond, a form of revelation, in the quest for truth? Is man’s grasping a form of the truth somehow a rebellion against G-d and the first order of things that are given? Is the life spent in pursuit of knowing the truth a genuine way to happiness, whether one attains or can obtain it or not? To address these questions Maimonides for Strauss was crucial for in Maimonides Socratic philosophy and biblical religion in the reception history of rabbinic interpretation join forces, both believing in search for knowledge of the truth, and both believing that knowledge of the truth will guide man to the right way of life. However as revealed in Rav Yehudah HaLevy’s Kuzari and ibn Falquera’s The Epistle of the
Debate, Judaism and philosophy solve the question of truth as a way of life in perhaps different modalities. Maimonides wished to defend philosophy before the rabbinic court, while at the same time providing for philosophers a defense of revealed religion before the tribunal of reason in science. Both philosophy and revealed religion share the fundamental ahistorical view, noted by Yerushalmi in his book Zakor, that there cannot be access to the truth in its unity if it changes essentially with the changes of historical period or epoch. That is to say we do not reject Maimonides’s cosmology because Maimonides had not known of the scientific revolution of Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo and Newton that squarely rejected the geocentric universe in favor of a heliocentric universe. That is to say by way of analogy that Maimonides knew with Democratis that atoms existed from antiquity even if Einstein later had to prove in the practical realm that the atom could be split or before Heisenberg had to prove that we can never know with certainty the location of an electron around the nucleus of an atom. Yet Maimonides believed in the possibility of certainty long before Human skepticism. This is the essence of my review of the popular Israeli work Sodotov shel Moreh Nevukhim by Goodman. Championing uncertainty has clouded the philosophic scene with a Hobbesian Leviathan recognition of the complexity of reality, the grey zones, that defied determinacy and the ability to know at all by total cognition. Strauss viewed Maimonides’ method as the key by which to bypass or make an end run around the current morass and impasses of the crises of modernity also recognized by Gershom Scholem, including the modern philosophic amnesia of what philosophy is fundamentally in essence as the soul’s openness to wonder, often invoked by contemplating the heavenly bodies for which Thaetetus in the dialogue of Plato feels vertigo, what later Aristotle and Maimonides referred to as the First Cause who set in motion the heavenly bodies, which are in fact angelic intelligences. While Maimonides was very aware of the historical stages in the development of Judaism, in fact opening the MT. with a reception history of the transmission or masorah of revealed traditions based on what Rav Sadya calls, “reliable tradition” Maimonides is so key for Strauss because he perceived that historicism alone, or some rabbinic form of it, will not save the moderns from the crisis of modernity, just as it did not save the medieval from the crisis Rambam thought he was living through.

After a masterful introduction that employs the greatest of literary and artistic technique, even perhaps beyond Plato’s art, the Guide opens with the affirmation of the notion that man being created BiTzelem Elokim, is because man has the potential to intellectualize or cognize, a key to human excellence, and in fact he sekel hapoel is the bridge (kesher) between man and G-d and all divinity in the scheme of the universal order of first things. As Hannah Arendt recognized in Man in Dark Times, Strauss did not assume the majority of human beings ever drew on or actualized their potential for thought and to be thinking beings, for the many never choose to think or are aware of the radical transcendent nature of true thinking, which is so ennobling, not merely edifying, as to take man out of the world into eternal verities true for all peoples at all times regardless of geographical-economic-cultural differences.

Strauss recognized the perplexity and art of writing as a form of concealment as revealing that philosophers employ illustrated by Maimonides so that one must read the great eagle as if trying to crack a secret code or to decipher an ancient language, or to gather and put together clues as a detective to resolve a mystery. To enter into a philosophic clearing after emerging from a Dantean “dark forest” was as if to decipher a Rosetta stone that made everything clear. Modernities pet peeve was
indeterminacy, uncertainty, ambiguity, obtuseness, and lack of resolution as illustrated by the work of Kafka, Becket, and Claude Levi-Strauss. In these masterful creative writers even plot, what Aristotle identified as the essence or soul of a work of art, is often indiscernible. This indeterminacy and uncertainty can be found also in Derrida’s thought, whereby “semantic slippage” prevents any real communication not to mention knowledge attained with certainty within the linguistic play of Grammatology. Even Impressionistic art receded from the Realism of the Dutch masters who still acknowledged that reality could be mimetically reflected in realism. After Impressionism abstract art of Clay, Picasso, Kandinsky, etc. made reality into a parable itself that could only be represented in the most “far out” ways. Thus every expression in science, art, and literature is the Hegelian expression of the spirit of its times, as Walter Benjamin also noted in his essay, on “the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction.” So different thus is the spirit of modernity and Nietzschean post-modernity from let’s say the vertical frigid fixed Egyptian charioteer in ancient Egyptian art, that was dynamically transformed by the Greek classical revolution in art characterized by the energy, movement, and process represented in the discus thrower.

Strauss however sought to untangle himself from modernity’s forgetfulness (verlassenheit). Strauss did this by arguing for the superior nature of the medieval enlightenment of Maimonides, Gersonides, and Crescas, over the modern enlightenment. However Strauss indicates that Maimonides wrote more carefully than his modern descendants. Maimonides concealed his true teachings from the many, as if tying trick knots, wrapping mystery in a paradox concealed as a riddle. Thus Strauss draws our attention to Maimonides Platonic artful construction, and the literary nature of the Guide to make Maimonides a guide for all time, including modernity and the Nietzschean post-modernity when striving after “What is truth?”. For Maimonides truth, emet/aletheia/Wahrheit, as Gadamer acknowledges has a method, but beyond the limits of Gadamer’s analysis truth as the Hebrew word indicates is made up of the first, middle, and last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This is not to say with Derrida that Strauss like Habermas was a mystic who viewed the secrets of ma’aseh bereshit as an abracadabra of the alphabet soup of mystical theurgic practice, whereby the BiHeberam- creates absolutely, yesh miyin. Strauss’ project is much more modest. Strauss attempts to waken his readers to acknowledge that eternal problems are acknowledged and possible to pursue. However in pursuit of these eternal verities Strauss harks us to be aware of the exoteric-esoteric dimension, whereby Maimonides may have actually deliberatively contradicted himself to hide from the many who might misinterpret and persecute the few, for the few whose intellectual honesty trumps their historical particularity in time and place. That Kant never left his place of Konigsberg, although he wanted to see the ocean, is confirmation of Strauss’ understanding that the life of the mind can transcend time and place. In part Strauss sought to make moderns “careful readers” what Paul Cantor in the book Leo Strauss- Towards a critical engagement, refers to as Nietzschean langsam lessen, or slow reading. Strauss was appalled at modernity’s quick fix, fast food, sound byte mentality that was not willing to put in the hard work of slow careful reading, encapsulated in the Talmudic dictum, Lifum Zarah Agra. This did not mean only analysis of being a microbiologist to break everything down to its elemental parts. This careful reading, which Strauss knew Maimonides engaged because Maimonides wrote so carefully, employed true freedom of the mind which Strauss believed Maimonides cherished as a virtue as did Al Farabi. This virtue accounts not only for Maimonides’ poetic Platonic artful virtuosity, but allows one to discover a forgotten type of reading and
writing. Strauss confessed that he encountered this careful reading and freedom of mind among Maimonides and not among the modern enlightenment of Voltaire, Diderot, D’allembert in its secular form, and its analogue in Jewish thought with Mendelsohn, Cohen, and Rosenzweig. For Strauss modernity was filled with dogmas paradoxically since it rejected the dogmas of medieval religion only to replace them with the pet peeves of secular platitudes- progress, freedom, liberty- without locating their legacy from ancient Greek thought. Those rare few who write carefully and read carefully with literary economy employ a Platonic artistry in the service of philosophy and Strauss did much to recuperate the ancient debate between philosophy and poetry whereby poetry or art must be ministerial to philosophy etc. Derivatively the mutual influence of philosophy and theology whereby in Christian thought philosophy was ministerial to theological doxa. Strauss sought to recoup a philosophy free of other agendas, a philosophic life on its own terms. Strauss uncovered a deeper level of awareness, originality, and radicalism in Maimonides who understood that true thought is transhistorical for Maimonides originality and depth as a great thinker and the boldness and unconventionality of mind to stand over and above his era was his ability to end one era and open the door on another, MiMoshe Lo Kam KiMoshe.” Strauss employed the metaphor of “antiquities” to note that when approaching to learn from a medieval like Maimonides the great medieval philosophic books are not just archeological relics appealing to the antiquarian impulses or “romantic urges.” According to Strauss the reason to return to the texts of the medieval enlightenment is to learn from them not merely about them. However it is acknowledged that to learn from them, we must first put under our belt substantial knowledge determining with historical exactness both what they actually said and what they actually intended by what they said on multiple levels with all the Socratic irony that philosophers employ strategically to guard themselves with caution from persecution. This persecution is illustrated by the Maimonidean controversy, the putting of the Ramhal in herem, and the bitter feuds and rechilut between Hasidim and mitnagdim, whereby both sides even informed on the other to the government, so that for instance Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi was imprisoned on two occasions. Strauss notes that the government tried to put to death Aristotle as it did with Socrates, who defended philosophy before the Athenian court in the Apology, but Aristotle out of prudence fled, refusing to embrace as Socrates did the martyrdom, not escaping with Crito, but drinking the hemlock willingly.

For Strauss we can only genuinely hear the monologues of the great minds by allowing ourselves to sit at their feet and become their students, learning to read their texts again with fresh eyes, to hear the unfamiliar things they may teach us, in order to see anew those truths whose light may have been made obscure by modernity’s assumptions. Thus Strauss in the piety of questioning, which is the piety of thought, asked, “Why is our modern or even post-modern contemporary thought not sufficient? How is modern thought fallacious in its assumptions of making medieval thought superfluous and obsolete based on its antiquated scientific knowledge and historical context? Strauss gave the example of ibn Tufl who when placed in the scenario of being on an desert island ends up contemplating the attributes of G-d, while the modern analogue different from the medieval ibn Tufl, in Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, when put in the scenario of being stranded on an island, enslaves the population and pollutes the environment by founding a technological system. The genius of Shakespeare in the Tempest is that Prospero on his Island, comes to realize with comic wisdom, “my library is not dukedom large enough” and thereby free Ariel his Golem, and returns to civilization (Italy) where his daughter Miranda can
marry her destined star crossed lovers. Shakespeare’s Tempest operates between the poles of Rousseau’s characterization of the “noble savage” found in nature and the corrupting aspect of culture and civilization that he noted in the Versailles’ salons versus the Hobbesian affirmation of the necessity of a large state bureaucracy to prevent a state of nature “that is nasty brutish and short, a world of each-against each.” In Strauss’ book on Hobbes, Strauss recognized that Hobbes had witnessed civil war and mob violence and thus advocated in Leviathan for an empowered large liberal bureaucratic state. However Strauss who also witnessed the rise of an evil regime from which he fled Nazi Europe, opted for the redeeming aspect of civilization without its Freudian discontents. Strauss as Plato, was conferenced about the polis and its well-being. Just as Diogenes Laertius notes that Socrates brought philosophy down from the stars so it might dwell in the cities, Strauss- Kojève debates bespeak to Strauss’ great concern to avert another potential totalitarian rise to power as he witnessed in Germany by the Nazis. Strauss sought intellectually to return to Maimonides over the modern political philosophers to navigate the seas of political thought.

Strauss sought to awaken a Kantian prejudice in favor of Maimonides’ thought over modern thought. According to Strauss the modern enlightenment sought to substitute one set of prejudices for another, assuming the medieval era to be characterized by the “dark ages of obscurantism and superstition” which is a fallacious modern characterization. For Strauss philosophy is grounded in the love of truth rather than the Platonic doxa and Maimonides is an exemplar for leading us out of the current quagmire of modernity’s crises by his dedication to the love of truth and his conviction that this must often be concealed insofar as it is presented “between the lines.” Thus the modern reader must learn and ancient form of reading “to read between the lines” to uncover the nature of intentional contradiction.