H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Abraham Melamed. *Wisdom's Little Sister: Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Political Thought.* Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2011. 350 pp. $109.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-936235-32-2.

Reviewed by Steven Frankel (Xavier University)
Published on H-Judaic (October, 2012)
Commissioned by Jason Kalman

The Emergence of Jewish Political Philosophy

Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the question of whether there is such a thing as a Jewish perspective on political and social issues is no longer a theoretical question, but a practical and pressing topic for setting social and political policy. To wit, the last half century has witnessed the birth of a host of institutes, journals, books, and conferences whose primary aim is to identify the nature of Jewish political philosophy. The discussion has generated many interesting studies, but it has not erased the prevailing skepticism about the existence of a Jewish political philosophy. Certainly, Jews have always speculated on political issues and developed a variety of ideologies. But the speculations of individuals are hardly the same as an explicitly Jewish position, that is, "a continuous tradition of political thought" from the Bible to modernity with a common set of themes and ideas (p. 50).

The absence of a Jewish point of view in political philosophy is often attributed to the fact that Jews were excluded from power and consequently lacked political experience and reflection. This view is summarized by professor of medieval political thought Ralph Lerner as follows: "'a people that for more than a millennium lacked the least appearance of autonomous political life and that for the most part was firmly excluded from governance and administration is not a likely source of independent political reflection"' (p. 27). This opinion was prominent among both secular and religious Jews before 1948. According to Leon Pinsker's analysis in *Autoemancipation* (1882), the exclusion of Jews from political power had the effect of making them reliant on the generosity of other nations. In fact, once the Jewish problem is understood in purely political terms, salvation can be realized in the form of a modern, liberal, secular state. Political philosophy was not part of the Jewish tradition, but with a break from the tradition, it can provide the basis for recovering Jewish dignity.

Similarly, some observant Jews concur that political philosophy has no place in Judaism and that the Torah deliberately avoids outlining any particular model of an ideal society. This view is expressed most clearly by the Israeli public intellectual Yeshayahu Leibowitz who asserts: "'it is difficult to say that any one of the multitude of opinions that have been expressed in Jewish history concerning the individual and society is one that represents the Jewish point of view.... There is no Jewish ethic, no Jewish policy, and no Jewish concept of society"' (p. 17). The only distinguishing feature of a Jew is his adherence to the laws of the Torah. Regarding political and social questions, these can be assessed only as means to the fulfillment of the Torah. No form of government has any particular value per se. Jews have adopted a variety of positions on such issues because there is no particularly Jewish point of view. Leibowitz's view concurs with the Zionists' perspective that Jews have been excluded from power, but he sees this positively, as a result of their concern with the divine law over the political law.

The Israeli scholar, Abraham Melamed, rejects both positions. In his prestigious career of nearly forty years as a scholar of medieval and Renaissance Jewish intellectual history at the University of Haifa, Melamed has attempted to establish the prominence of political philosophy in Judaism, particularly in the Middle Ages when Jews were largely excluded from power. His latest book, *Wisdom's Little Sister*, is a collection of essays written over the past thirty years. The title of the book comes from a poem written by a fifteenth- century Italian Jewish scholar, Moses of Rieti, which compares political philosophy to the little sister of Torah. By wryly invoking this passage, Melamed indicates that he hopes his research will support the project to "turn this little sister into a woman of importance, making political philosophy a legitimate and important field of research within Jewish philosophy" without undermining the dignity and wis-

dom of the tradition (p. 49). By restoring the place of political philosophy in Judaism, Melamed's scholarship can be seen as having an eminently practical function, namely, the identification of political thought as essential to the Jewish tradition.

One of the most useful and enlightening elements of Melamed's study is his analysis of the scholarship that led to the contemporary efforts, including his own, to restore political philosophy to its rightful place. We have already mentioned the efforts by secular Zionism and some varieties of Orthodoxy to deny a place for political philosophy within Judaism. In fact, the dispute over the status of Jewish political philosophy predates the creation of the State of Israel. The consensus among modern scholars was that political philosophy could be safely excluded from the study of Judaism in the Diaspora after the destruction of the Second Temple. In reviewing the general histories of Judaism by scholars ranging from Isaac Husik and Julius Guttmann to Colette Sirat, one finds a complete neglect of political theory.

This neglect went largely unchallenged until the publication in Berlin in 1935 of Leo Strauss's *Philosophie und Gesetz* (Philosophy and Law), which argued that what had been understood as "Jewish Philosophy" in the Middle Ages was actually political philosophy. Strauss showed that this misunderstanding was not simply a misreading of medieval philosophy, but the result of a misreading of both ancient Platonic philosophy and of the Jewish tradition as seen through a Spinozistic lens. Melamed does not discuss the impact of Baruch/Benedict Spinoza on modern Jewish thought, a topic that goes beyond the ken of medieval and Renaissance studies, but he does describe the misreading of Platonic philosophy in fascinating detail.

Though individual Jews, such as Philo of Alexandria, had contended with Greek philosophy, Melamed notes, their influence was limited in the Jewish community. Thus, the first extended encounters between Judaism and philosophy emerge in the tenth century following the Arabic translations and Islamic interpretations of Greek philosophy. The Islamic philosophers were principally interested in the political philosophy of Plato because of its emphasis on law and the best regime. (In a subsequent essay, Melamed discusses whether Aristotle's *Politics* was unknown to the medieval Islamic world as most scholars believe or whether it was known but deliberately neglected, as Shlomo Pines suggests.) Because both Judaism and Islam view revelation as a comprehensive law, both faiths recognize the value and relevance of Platonic political philosophy, which likewise emphasizes the importance of law over beliefs and ideas.

In sharp contrast, Christianity "develops in an existing civilization, in the heart of the Roman Empire at its peak. Therefore, not only did it not have a pressing need to lay down a structured set of positive and negative precepts, for such laws already existed, [but] any such attempt to regulate life in the political realm [also] would most certainly have brought Christianity into violent conflict with the authority of the Roman Empire" (p. 39). As a result of its historical circumstances, Christianity developed a sharp distinction between canon law, which remained the domain of the church and dealt with spiritual matters, and civil law, which remained the province of worldly rulers. In this rather Spinozistic account of the genealogy of Christianity, the emphasis rests on its search for salvation through faith for which philosophy can play a central role. In Islam and Judaism, however, philosophy appears to stand outside the law and must first justify itself before it can be reconciled and embraced.

This distinction, according to Strauss, is critical to capturing the meaning and spirit of medieval Jewish philosophy. For example, reading of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* (circa 1190) from a Christian perspective, we can see an apolitical discussion of the critical issues, such as the question of creation, divine providence, and the immortality of the soul. Some scholars, such as Julius Guttmann, even assumed that the *Guide*'s treatment of these subjects supersedes the law, or that the law must be interpreted in light of these theoretical conclusions. Strauss argued that this is a fundamental misreading of Maimonides since philosophy is conditional on revelation or law for its legitimacy, and from "the moment God is represented as a lawgiver, the question of the perception of divinity is no longer purely a psychological problem but a political matter" (p. 43). As a result, the status of politics, which in both Christianity and the Aristotelian classification is the lowest of sciences, becomes elevated to the ultimate peak of human knowledge. For Maimonides, the closest man can come to resembling God is through imitating God's attributes of ruling the universe through just political rule.

In assessing the encounter between Judaism and Greek philosophy, Melamed proves himself to be sensitive to the cultural and religious nuances of the age. It would be tempting to demand of the scholar a more explicit account of the results of this confrontation. Melamed writes that this discussion is based on the view that Jewish political philosophy is a "continuous tradition of political thought, which has different expressions

and underwent internal changes over the ages, as it is expressed in the Bible, the Mishnah, the Talmud, the Halakhic literature, and in Hellenistic, medieval, and modern Jewish philosophy" (p. 50). But how extensive are those "internal changes"? Do they constitute a repudiation in all but name of the foundations of the law?- Melamed presents medieval philosophy as a different branch "growing from the same trunk" (p. 33). But later in a footnote, he concedes that medieval Jewish philosophy "was essentially a new tradition founded in the Middle Ages" (p. 35n32). The reader might wonder how much change can a tradition absorb and still remain the same tradition? Similarly, how can we assess whether changes are consistent with the tradition? Such questions point beyond the scope of this collection.

Though *Philosophie und Gesetz* was largely neglected after it was banned by the Nazis, Strauss's students went on to interpret medieval philosophy in light of its Platonic framework, "creating a new area of research into Jewish philosophy in the Middle Ages and other periods that has produced dozens of studies in the last twenty years" (p. 48). Melamed's subsequent essays on the status of law in medieval Jewish philosophy, as well as his sensitive portraits of central figures in the medieval Jewish world, make a significant contribution to this rebirth of Jewish political thought.

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Citation: Steven Frankel. Review of Melamed, Abraham, *Wisdom's Little Sister: Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Political Thought.* H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. October, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36264

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