Occasional Papers on

Jewish Civilization, Jewish Thought and Philosophy

How Jewish Was Leo Strauss?
STEVEN B. SMITH

Jewish Voices, Jewish Influence and Neoconservatism
YOSSI SHAIN AND STEVEN LENZNER
THE PROGRAM FOR JEWISH CIVILIZATION (PJC) at Georgetown University is home to the study of the global dimensions of Judaism throughout the ages and especially in our own era, with an emphasis on the ethical aspects of Jewish civilization and its interrelationship with other peoples and polities. This innovative approach examines Judaism as a religion and it also explores Judaism as a civilization and a community of people in dialogue with others. This program, which is unique within the American academic context, expands the understanding of Jewish history to include cultural, religious, political, philosophical, literary, and scientific accomplishments.

Based at the University’s Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, the program benefits from the participation of outstanding faculty and prestigious programs in international affairs, government, history, religion, ethics, languages, science, law, and culture. Georgetown’s interest in the place of religion in public and international affairs and in the potential for mitigating conflict based in religious identity augments the activities of the PJC in many ways. The interdisciplinary character of the PJC fosters a rich array of activities including scholarship, academic courses, conferences, lectures, cultural programs and participation in campus and community dialogue. The PJC also offers an undergraduate certificate in Jewish Civilization through the School of Foreign Service. Its programs, which are open to the public, serve students of every religious and ethnic background.

Rabbi Harold White, a scholar and Jewish chaplain at Georgetown University, has worked tirelessly for many years to help create the Program for Jewish Civilization. Professor Yossi Shain serves as the director and Professor Robert J. Lieber is the chair of the executive committee. Melissa Weinberg Spence is the program administrator and Kayla Meltzer Drogosz serves as research fellow. With generous support from the President of Georgetown University, John J. DeGioia, the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service and Dean Robert L. Gallucci, as well as Professor Joshua Mitchell, chair of the government department, the PJC hosts conferences and lectures on a wide range of topics connected to Jewish civilization.
The Occasional Papers and Center Conversations are short publications that bring together scholars from different disciplines with policy leaders engaged in current affairs. The idea behind the series is a simple one: There are many authentically expert voices addressing important questions about how we might examine Judaism as both a religion and a civilization in dialogue with others. In these pages we examine not only questions of ethics, politics and international affairs, but we also explore how the arts and sciences affect our understanding of Jewish civilization. These papers seek to promote a deeper awareness of how the faith and practices of the Jewish people contribute to—and are shaped by—the ideas and institutions around them.
Introduction

Athens or Jerusalem, reason or revelation? These were Leo Strauss’ questions. Strauss, who himself was steeped in the tradition of both Athens and Jerusalem, calls into question what he described to be the “deepest of tensions” experienced by modern man. In his writing both reason and revelation are presented as powers to be reckoned with yet both are essential. By making it possible to consider Jerusalem and Athens again, Strauss has begun the rediscovery of man who remains inextricably part of both worlds. As the scholar Hadley Arkes writes, “If he tips the scales at all, it is towards Jerusalem.”

Whether or not you agree with this conclusion, it is certain that despite Strauss’ general role as a political theorist, he never lost his deep interest in the Jewish tradition and in Maimonides in particular. Strauss, a refugee from Nazism, was born to a pious Jewish family in Germany and was educated there, studying with, among others, Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger. He is increasingly recognized as one of the greatest political theorists of the twentieth century. Our volume here, however, focuses on Strauss and his relationship to his religious tradition. It also looks at how Strauss is understood—and often misunderstood—with respect to neoconservative political traditions in the United States.

Our contributor Steven B. Smith, a political theorist and professor at Yale University, examines Strauss’ relationship not only to classical political theory, but to Judaism and to significant events in Jewish history. The conflict between Biblical faith and Greek philosophy, Strauss claimed, is said to be “characteristic of the West” and also “the secret of its vitality.” It is both its “core” and its “nerve.” Smith resists simplistic descriptions of Strauss, rather he shows us how this dialectic—the tension between philosophical reasoning and inspired revelation—resonates in Strauss’ own self-understanding of Judaism and the fate of German-Jewry. Strauss thought it was our “radical sense of our dependence upon God” that animates the Biblical-self. In light of this, not contemplation, but piety, awe, obedience, and the need for mercy serve as our most indelible characteristics.

In these pages Yossi Shain and Steven Lenzner examine the question of who speaks on behalf of Jewish interests with respect to foreign policy concerns. Yossi Shain and Steven Lenzner are both political scientists; Shain is a professor of government at Georgetown University and Steven Lenzner serves as a fellow for the New Citizenship Project. Together they examine the roots
of neoconservatism and explore the political agenda of others who see this as synonymous with inward-looking parochial perspectives of the Jewish community.

Strauss, of course, figures prominently in the history of neoconservatism, though as our authors tell us he is not always well understood. Shain and Lenzner show that critics of neoconservative positions are sometimes making thinly veiled anti-Semitic arguments which presume infinite power and influence among Jews who serve in public offices or in the White House. These critics have made sweeping claims that American supporters of Israel—and Israel itself—were driving U.S. foreign policy. The heightened tensions that have developed around those who have conflated Judaism with neoconservative positions became so strong that it was necessary for Colin Powell to dispel such positions at a public hearing before the House Appropriations Subcommittee. Speaking then in his capacity as Secretary of State, Powell flatly rejected any suggestion that the Bush administration’s confrontation with Iraq was engineered by Israel or American Jews.

The contribution by Shain and Lenzner is also part of a multi-year project that seeks to identify and map the contemporary political structures of the Jewish community in America and abroad. Professor Shain, who conceptualized this project and remains its director and coordinator, was awarded the initial grant from the Posen Foundation to begin research in 2001. In general, the authors and contributors to this project try to understand an essential question: Who speaks on behalf of the Jews and with what authority? Of course, there is no simple answer to this complex question.

Ori Soltes and Tanja Flanagan, authors who contributed to our third publication in the summer of 2005, helped us understand the nature of political representation and public voice in the Jewish communities of America, Israel and Europe. Shain and Lenzner, in turn, examine the origins of neoconservatism and how this relates to perceptions—and misperceptions—of power and voice in the Jewish community.

The kinship bonds—and political positions—among different religious and ethnic groups are multiple and varied, and the Jewish community is no exception. Among the multiple strands that make up Jewish ties are religion, tradition, culture, family, preservation of the memory of the Holocaust, and attachment to the land of Israel. Shain and Lenzner show, however, that these kinship bonds are profoundly misunderstood. “International opinion,” they claim, “exaggerates and mistrusts the political efficacy and unity of the Jewish communities of the world.” Criticisms of Leo Strauss’ writings and of political positions advocated by the Jewish community are intimated in the critique of neoconservatives. For Jewish political thinkers such as Strauss, insights into Judaism and the nature of religious experiences are as enduring as the political questions they seek to answer and understand.

It is customary to close with a disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Program for Jewish Civilization, Georgetown University, or the trustees, donors, officers, or staff of Georgetown University. That said, this publication fits nicely with our program’s tradition of scholarship. Our hope is that the conversation here will spark a renewed discussion of how religion and reason, passions and interests, and Jerusalem and Athens contribute to a better understanding of Jewish Civilization and its relationship to politics and international affairs.

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How Jewish Was Leo Strauss?

STEVEN B. SMITH, who has been appointed as the Alfred Cowles Professor of Government at Yale University, is a specialist in political philosophy and the history of political thought. Smith, who is also master of Branford College, has written widely on political philosophers Hegel, Aristotle, Rousseau and Spinoza. His books include Reading Althusser: An Essay on Structural Marxism; Hegel’s Critique of Liberalism: Rights in Context, which examines the Hegelian critique of individual rights; and Spinoza: Liberalism and the Question of Jewish Identity, which explores Spinoza’s efforts to defend freedom of opinion and toleration of religious diversity. Smith has also written about classical political theory, liberalism, Marxism, American political thought and the philosophy of the social sciences. His articles have appeared in such publications as Review of Politics, American Political Science Review, Political Theory, Social Science Quarterly, Ethics and Poetics Today, among others. His book Spinoza: Liberalism, the Enlightenment and the Jewish Question, published by Yale University Press, was awarded the Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize. Smith is currently director of special programs in the Humanities at Yale, which includes the directed studies program. He has also recently written Spinoza’s Book of Life, currently in press, as well as several other books and articles.
How Jewish Was Leo Strauss?

STEVEN B. SMITH

In the Forward to *Zakhor*, Yosef Yerushalmi’s classic study of Jewish memory, Harold Bloom, the Yale literary critic, once described Leo Strauss as “political philosopher and Hebraic sage.”1 This always seemed to me to be unusually prescient. For Strauss is most frequently understood as an interpreter and critic of a number of thinkers, both ancient and modern, who belong to the history of political philosophy. But far less often is he regarded as a contributor to Jewish thought. It is neither as an historian nor as a philosopher but as a Jew that I want to consider him here.

At first blush this approach to Strauss seems relatively unproblematic. Even a superficial perusal of his major works show that Jewish themes were a continual preoccupation of his from the earliest times onwards. His first book *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* (1930) was written as member of an academy for Jewish research in Berlin. His second book *Philosophy and Law* (1935) looked to Spinoza’s most illustrious predecessor, Moses Maimonides, and his conception of law. Furthermore, a number of later essays and lectures return to these early themes, especially his Frank Cohen lecture on “Jerusalem and Athens.” Finally, in a semi-autobiographical introduction to the English translation of his book on Spinoza, Strauss spoke in no uncertain terms about the various currents of neo-orthodoxy, political, and cultural Zionism within which he came to maturity.

It has certainly not always been the case that Jewish themes were regarded as central to Strauss’s *oeuvre*. His most widely read book *Natural Right and History* makes scarcely a reference to any of the thinkers of the ancient or modern Jewish tradition. His interest is recovering the ground of natural right from the rise of the German historical consciousness. He makes it appear as though the greatest problem affecting post-World War II America has been the influence of Max Weber on American departments of social science. In addition there is not so much as a nod toward the two most significant events of 20th century Jewish history: the Holocaust and the creation of the state of Israel. Strauss seems intent on playing down his Jewishness even as his silence underscores it.

Yet this cannot be the whole story. It does not go to the heart of the matter. For a writer who taught his students to read “between the lines” and for whom what is left unsaid is as important as what is repeated with wearisome repetition, it may not be surprising if the Jewish Question were to turn out to be Strauss’s major concern. A review in the *Times Literary Supplement* by George Steiner has captured something of this:

If, in the traditional pairing which Strauss adopts, the life-long labors turn around Jerusalem and Athens, it is the former which, at the last, radiates at the center. It is in the light or dark of Jewish identity and history, made dramatically intense by the twentieth century, that Leo Strauss, Hermann Cohen’s dissenting successor in the development and tragedy of German Judaism, reads, that he “lives” the interactions between classical Greek, Islamic, Renaissance, and Judaic views of the meaning of man. Everywhere the declared topic is outwardly remote from Judaica, in the somewhat strange book on Aristophanes and Socrates, for example, we need, as Strauss himself would have it, to read between the lines. The Hebrew characters are never far off.2

To say that Strauss is not just a historian but a contributor to Jewish thought presupposes that there is some meaningful sense in which we can speak of something called Jewish political thought. But what, for instance, does the thought of men such as Akiba, Rashi, Judah Halevi, and Maimonides have in common with the thought of such “non-Jewish Jews” as Spinoza, Heine, Marx, and Freud? What can such names possibly
mean except to create a list of Jewish thinkers no different in kind from books and magazines that give us names of famous Jewish movie stars and sports figures (Did you know that Cary Grant...?). It gets us no closer to defining the thing in itself. So to ask the question that informs my title: How Jewish was Leo Strauss?

Jerusalem and Athens

The core of Strauss’s thought, the theme to which he would return time and again, is what he called metaphorically by the names of Jerusalem and Athens.

These terms came to represent for Strauss the “core” or “nerve” of the West. The conflict between Biblical faith and Greek philosophy is said to be “characteristic of the West” and “the secret of its vitality” (RCPR, 270). This conflict, symbolized by these eternal archetypes, indicates the two great antitheses of the Western tradition. The Bible and philosophy represent two fundamentally different “codes” or ways of life that defy final reconciliation. In the final analysis one can be either a philosopher or a theologian but one cannot be both, even though Strauss argues that each should be open to the challenge of the other.

What exactly is that challenge? Philosophy, as Strauss claims, is the attempt to replace opinion about all things by knowledge about all things (WPP, 11). By its nature, philosophy is the effort to understand the whole or cosmos by means of one’s unaided reason alone. Philosophy must submit, and submit ruthlessly, everything to the bar of its own critical rationality. It was their relentless emphasis on reason, their own reason, which led the philosophers to believe that contemplation is the highest or best life for a human being. Biblical thought, by contrast, begins not from the experience of intellectual curiosity about all things but from a sense of awe or fear of the Lord. According to the Bible, human life is characterized not by self-sufficiency but by a radical sense of our dependence upon God. Not contemplation but piety, obedience, and the need for divine mercy are what is most characteristic of us (RCPR, 246).

This conflict, then, between revelation and reason, the Bible and philosophy, took on from the beginning a predominantly secular or political character. Philosophy, as represented in the person of Socrates, finds its natural home in the city. Philosophy presupposes a context of urbanity, wealth, and leisure to sustain it. The life of simple piety and humble awe, as extolled by the Bible and its most authoritative interpreters, by contrast, is unequivocal in favor of the rustic or pastoral life. According to the Bible, the first murderer was also the founder of the first city and the arts necessary for civilized life. It is no accident that it was not Cain, the tiller of the soil, but Abel, the keeper of the sheep, who found favor in the eyes of God (RCPR, 251).

To be sure, despite the obvious and important differences between Biblical thought and classical philosophy, Strauss was not blind to their areas of agreement. In the first place, there is broad agreement regarding the place of morality in the overall economy of human life. Furthermore, both Greek philosophy and the Bible agree that the locus of morality is the patriarchal family that is the basic cell of society. And second, both agree that the core of morality is justice. But justice is meant primarily as obedience to law. Law is understood here to mean transcendent sanction. Strauss is not altogether clear about the precise content of justice or the penalty for its transgression. However, it entails a fundamental intuition about certain restraints upon our behavior or, as he put it, “a kind of divination that not everything is permitted.” Indeed, Strauss claims that what Plato says about the power of divine retribution in the Laws is “literally identical” with certain verses of Amos and Psalm 139 (RCPR, 247-48).

The conflict or tension between the Bible and philosophy that has been the “nerve” of the Western world stands today in a state of crisis. The “crisis of
The “crisis of the West,” as Strauss sometimes calls it, is a direct result of a new kind of philosophy, the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which is based on the idea of progress. This idea is neither clearly of Greek nor of Biblical heritage. Unlike the Biblical prophets who chastised their contemporaries by invoking an earlier time of piety and obedience, the modern philosophers beginning with Machiavelli, Descartes, and Hobbes turned away from the past and looked toward the future.

Between the past and the future one could discern progress understood as the conquest of nature for the relief of man’s earthly estate.

The crisis of the West reveals itself today as the attempt of modern philosophy or the Enlightenment to vanquish, once and for all, the claims of revealed religion or what Strauss calls simply “Orthodoxy.” At the core of Orthodoxy—whether Christian, Jewish, or Muslim—is a belief in the revealed or mysterious character of the law. Even later claims regarding the natural law represent a falling away from the standards of strict orthodoxy by suggesting that law can be understood or discovered by unaided human reason. Obviously, the attack upon Orthodoxy is as old as philosophy itself. The official charge brought against Socrates by the court of Athens was that he was a disbeliever. What Strauss disputes is that any pre-modern thinker ever seriously doubted the necessity of religion as a prerequisite for social order. The belief that God or the gods are in some sense “first for us” and that consequently the city is subservient to divine or revealed law constitutes the original form of political self-understanding.

It was only with the modern Enlightenment that we find for the first time the intransigent demand that philosophy replace Orthodoxy as the foundation for social order. Accordingly, the claims of religion were reviled in the works of the Enlightenment as productive only of error, distortion, and superstition. The underlying premise of the Enlightenment was the truths of philosophy were beneficial to society as a whole and that henceforth philosophers should be regarded no as threats to but as benefactors of the public good.

To be sure, the early founders of the Enlightenment wrote works with titles like Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise, Locke, Reasonableness of Christianity, and Kant’s Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone precisely to defend themselves from allegations of political atheism. The early or moderate Enlightenment still regarded some kind of rationalized religion as a necessary basis for securing a just and stable social order. However, it became part of the modern demand for “probity” or intellectual honesty that religion, just like politics, defend itself against the bar of reason. For later more radical thinkers like Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger the terrors and harshness of existence or history were to be preferred to the comforts and illusions offered by the religious imagination (LAM, 256).

The question Strauss asks us to consider, then, is this. Was the Enlightenment successful in banishing religion or at least pushing it to the very periphery of civilization? Has the progress of culture witnessed an abatement of hostility toward philosophy? Or can we expect to see a “return of the repressed”? Is religion a permanent need of man, a permanent response to the human condition, or is it a remnant left over from a pre-rational, pre-scientific age? These are questions to which we shall return.

The Jewish Question

Strauss characterized the dilemma of modern Judaism—a dilemma from which he did not exempt himself—by a term borrowed from Spinoza, the subject of his first book. “The author” of Spinoza’s Critique of Religion described himself years later as “a young Jew born and raised in Germany who found himself in the grips of a theologico-political predicament” (LAM, 224). As the term implies, this predicament has both a theological and political dimension to it. The most immediate and urgent manifestation of this dilemma was, however,
the tenuous situation of Weimar. Weimar was a republic, a liberal democracy, a product of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment but also connected to the distinctively German Enlightenment of Goethe and Hegel. It was this connectedness to the tradition of German idealism that contributed above all to Weimar’s “moderate, nonradical character” (LAM, 224).

The dilemma of modern Jewry has a long genealogy going back far before Weimar to the time of Spinoza. Spinoza was to Strauss and many of his generation the first example of the modern Jew. Spinoza championed not only a break with Orthodoxy and the burdens of the ceremonial law, but was the first Jewish thinker to endorse liberal democracy in something like its modern form (LAM, 246). Although Spinoza had been anathemized by the Jewish community of Amsterdam for his suspected heresies, he was subsequently canonized by generations of Jewish modernists who celebrated him not only for showing the way out of the ghetto, but even for suggesting the possibility of reconstituting a Jewish state.

Strauss quotes from the third chapter of the Theologico-Political Treatise to indicate Spinoza’s call for an independent Jewish state: “Indeed, if the foundations of their religion did not effeminate their hearts, I would absolutely believe that some day, given the opportunity, they will set up their state again (de novo) and that God will choose them anew, so changeable are human affairs” (LAM, 229; WPP, 13; translation modified). On the basis of this sentence, Strauss assigns to Spinoza an honored role among the unconditional political Zionists.

In a number of places Strauss alludes to the fact that he was a political Zionist in his youth, and until the end of his life, regarded it as a highly “honorable” suggestion. He praised Zionism for its attempt to restore a sense of Jewish pride or self-respect in an era of assimilation and demoralization. But Zionism represented a break with tradition and the Jewish past.

First, as the passage just quoted indicates, Zionism ascribes responsibility for establishing a state not to prayer or patient waiting for the messiah, but to the force of one’s own arms, fighting. It turns responsibility for the security and even redemption of the Jewish people into a purely human problem. Works like Herzel’s Judenstaat or Pinsker’s Autoemanzipation understood the fate of the Jews as having nothing to do with the sins of the fathers or divine retribution but to power politics pure and simple (WPP, 13).

Zionism also looked for a solution to the Jewish Question not in a return to the beginnings but in a future yet to be redeemed. While Orthodoxy saw perfection in the past, in the time of the patriarchs, Zionism regards it as something yet to be achieved. This preference for the present to the past and the future to the present was prepared not only by Spinoza but by kabbalists like Isaac Luria who helped to introduce the idea of progress into modern Judaism (RCPR, 228).

For these reasons, among others, Strauss came to feel dissatisfied with a purely political Zionism. Any attempted solution to the Jewish Question that dealt with issues of land and sovereignty, but left untouched the inner world of Jewish thought and culture was bound to be unsatisfactory. “The Jewish state will be an empty shell without a Jewish culture which has its roots in the Jewish heritage,” he wrote (LAM, 229). Political Zionism needed to be supplemented by a cultural Zionism whose greatest proponent, Ahad Ha-am, was devoted to the restoration of the world of Hebrew language and literature, and folklore in the land of Israel. But even cultural Zionism was nothing more than a halfway house between hard-boiled political Zionism and a full-blooded religious Zionism. Even religious Zionism turns out to be precisely one of those unacceptable “harmonizations” or “syntheses” to which Strauss had objected. Religious Zionism would eventually have to choose between religion and Zion or between divine guidance and human guidance: there is no third way.
In the final analysis Strauss felt obligated to repudiate the Zionism of his youth as an honorable but flawed solution the Jewish Question. Even the establishment of the state of Israel was only a “modification” of the Galut, not its end. He claimed deep admiration and gratitude for the new Israeli state (“a blessing for all Jews everywhere regardless of whether they admit it or not” [LAM, 229]), but denied it any deeper redemptive significance. The Jewish Question, as a particular manifestation of the theologico-political dilemma, strictly speaking, admits no solution:

Finite, relative problems can be solved; infinite, absolute problems cannot be solved. In other words, human beings will never create a society which is free from contradictions. From every point of view it looks as if the Jewish people were the chosen people, at least in the sense that the Jewish problem is the most manifest symbol of the human problem insofar as it is a social or political problem (LAM, 230).

In a parallel and deeply revealing passage from a lecture entitled “Why We Remain Jews” Strauss affirms that there is no solution to the Jewish problem (JPCM, 317). The idea that for every problem there must be a solution is an Enlightenment fantasy of reason. Judaism, he writes, is an enigma, a “heroic delusion”: “The Jewish people and their fate are the living witness for the absence of redemption. This, one could say, is the meaning of the chosen people: the Jews are chosen to prove the absence of redemption.” Strauss mentions the Aleinu prayer testifying to trust in eternity as “surpassing everything that any present-day man could write” (JPCM, 327).

Passages like the above join issue with Franz Rosenzweig, the hero of Strauss’s youth, in putting the problems of Judaism ultimately beyond history. For both thinkers the essence of Judaism—the commanding voice of revelation—is, literally, above time and impervious to political solutions. This is why Strauss can regard the foundation of the Jewish state from his lofty vantage point as merely a “modification” of the Exile rather than its end. Strauss learned from Rosenzweig that the modern Jew is torn between two homelands (Zweistromland), between faith and reason, law and philosophy, Deutschtum and Judentum.

Strauss was compelled to admit that philosophy or reason can provide no clear answer as to a way out of this dilemma. Philosophy is of help only negatively. It can show us that the refutation of Orthodoxy has not and probably cannot be achieved by reason alone and therefore that there is no alternative but to choose. There is no solution to these alternatives except one of choice, radical existential choice for either revealed faith or resolute atheism.

The situation of modern Judaism is no different from that of Judaism at any other time—only more so. This is Strauss’s belief. Judaism and the Jewish Bible stand at one fork of the Western tradition, the other being Greek philosophy. The tension between the Bible and philosophy is said to represent the “two conflicting roots” of the West, “the secret of its vitality” (RCPR, 270). This conflict, symbolized by the two archetypes of Jerusalem and Athens, forms the two great polarities of the Western tradition between which we must choose. Strauss sounds almost like an existentialist in his emphasis on the necessity to choose between incompatible ends. “We are thus compelled from the very beginning to make a choice, to take a stand. But where do we stand,” Strauss asks, when confronted with the “incompatible claims of Jerusalem and Athens to our allegiance” (SPPP, 149; emphasis added).

Strauss’s answer to this conflict is a full and free recognition of the contending claims for our allegiance. Western history is replete with efforts to reconcile these competing loyalties ranging from the Thomistic idea of natural law to Enlightenment proposals for a religion of reason. All of these are deemed failures of nerve, that is, failures to confront and address the
fundamental alternatives of Jerusalem and Athens. Strauss advises his readers that this conflict must not be given up but rather lived through:

No one can be both a philosopher and a theologian, nor, for that matter, some possibility which transcends the conflict between philosophy and theology, or pretends to be a synthesis of both. But every one of us can be and ought to be either one or the other, the philosopher open to the challenge of theology or the theologian open to the challenge of philosophy (RCPR, 270).

There is a “Pascalian” flavor to Strauss’s solution that one can be either a philosopher or a theologian but not both. The distinction between philosophy and theology is ultimately a matter of faith. Reason cannot provide reason enough to follow reason. Philosophy presupposes a faith in reason that reason itself cannot provide. Such a solution is not necessarily unsettling to Jerusalem, but it must be deeply problematic for, if not “the complete and final defeat” of Athens.

**The Return to Orthodoxy?**

To return to the question posed by the title of this paper: How Jewish was Leo Strauss?

At the core of Strauss’s philosophy of Judaism stands a stark either/or: either a return to Orthodoxy and all that it entails or acceptance of the radical Enlightenment with its belief in the death of God. For the modern Jew faced with a choice between assimilation and Jewish self-affirmation this can only mean a return to Orthodoxy. The models for this Jewish revival had already been proposed by Buber and Rosenzweig, but Strauss believed that their efforts at return were fatally compromised by philosophical assumptions external to orthodoxy. For example, Buber’s famous *I-Thou* presupposes certain epistemological premises of modern philosophy, while Rosenzweig’s “new thinking” was tainted with historical relativism (WPP, 28-29; LAM, 237-39).

For all his talk of return (*t’shuvah*), Strauss has relatively little to say about the substance of Orthodoxy either as a set of beliefs or a way of life. His conception of Orthodoxy has nothing to do with the black hat Haredi community, but consists of a “Maimonidean” strategy that combines outward fidelity to the community of Israel with the private or “esoteric” commitment to philosophy and a life of free inquiry. This dual strategy allows one to maintain respect for, even love of, the tradition as a prophylactic to the alternatives of atheism and assimilation. Even as Jerusalem and Athens may be theoretical alternatives, for the sake of political prudence, it is necessary to find a way for them to cohabit.

Strauss’s solution to the dilemma of modern Judaism is, then, an orthodoxy of a very particular sort. It is one that preserves the appearances of fidelity to the law, supports the conception of Judaism as a “heroic delusion,” even as it denies to orthodoxy any truth-value (LAM, 254-55). To be sure, Strauss did not adopt this position in order to undermine Judaism, but to sustain it at least as a form of civil theology in support of a liberal polity. The doctrine of the double truth remains the only way of preserving the viability of Judaism in a post-Nietzschean world that demands probity at all costs. It is not surprising though that this idea of orthodoxy, what Strauss thinks of as a form of rational orthodoxy, should find little support among the devoutly orthodox. Gershom Scholem had it exactly right when he wrote to Walter Benjamin of Strauss’s bid for a chair in Jewish philosophy at the Hebrew University which “only three people at the very most will make use of the freedom to vote for the appointment of an atheist to a teaching position that serves to endorse the philosophy of religion.”

Strauss’s solution to the predicament of modern Jewishness is not without its own difficulties. It is not
possible, if indeed it ever was, to speak of Orthodoxy as
if it were all of one piece. If Orthodoxy is defined by a
return to the laws of the Torah, Talmud, and Midrash,
where does it say that the Jew is commanded to wear
a black gabardine coat and a fur trimmed hat in the
burning sun of Israel? Some Orthodox, like the
Mizrachi, are willing to work with other Jews and their
organizations, while others, like the Agudat Israel,
stay apart from non-practicing Jews even while they
have representatives in the Knesset. Still others like
the Satmar Hasidim living in the Boro Park section of
Brooklyn or the Naturei Karata (“watcher of the city
of Jerusalem”) in Israel have never even recognized
the Jewish state and stay as far away as possible from
contamination by the outside world. To be sure, all of
these sects are examples of orthodox Judaism, but the
great variety in terms of belief, ritual practice, and
dress shows how misleading it is to speak of Orthodoxy
with an upper case “O.” Perhaps it is fair to say that if
Strauss speaks for Orthodoxy it is for a sect of which
he remains the only member.

Those who live in glass houses should not throw
stones and it is reasonable to ask whether Strauss
escapes the same kinds of difficulties he so astutely
discerns in others. After all, Strauss’s own theologico-
political reflections were occasioned by experiences
unique to German Jews of his generation. Indeed no
Jewish community in history—with the possible
exception of the American—has ever identified itself
more completely or has ever lived more comfortably and
at peace with the nation in which it lived. For modern
Jews of virtually every disposition, the appearance of Hitler and National Socialism represented a profound
rupture with and therefore required a reassessment of modernity.

his compelling account of the various “waves” of
modernity are in one way or another a German Jew’s
attempt to account for the self-destruction of Germany
and the liquidation of German Jewry.

Strauss’s work as a whole is perhaps the last of the
great engagements with what Gershom Scholem called
the “German-Jewish Dialogue.” While Scholem saw
this dialogue as at best a one way conversation among
Jews regarding their status as Germans, Strauss saw
the fate of German Jewry as paradigmatic of the
illusions of modernity with its faith in progress and
belief in the rational unity of mankind. It is a fitting
that we remember the name of Leo Strauss today on
the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.
Notes


3. The following shorthand has been used to identify the works of Strauss:
   - WPP = *What is Political Philosophy and Other Studies* (New York: Free Press, 1959)

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In recent years since the onset of the war of attrition between Israel and the Palestinians, most Israelis, and indeed most Jews outside of Israel, have come to see the conflict as a challenge to Israel’s very right to exist and, more specifically, Israeli’s right to exercise national sovereignty. Whether or not the end of that war is now in sight—which many believe and others hope—one thing that promises to continue is the “Jewish question.” This question has of course been posed in countless forms before. In the face of numerous attacks on Jews and Jewish targets worldwide in recent years, there has been an outpouring of articles, essays and commentaries on the rise of anti-Semitism in the world. Major books and journals dedicate their cover stories to the subject of the “New Anti-Semitism” in the Muslim world and in Europe, and European institutions, as well as the United Nations, are now addressing the issue. Many people were stunned when Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad declared before the summit of World Islamic Nations that, “The Europeans killed 6 million Jews out of 12 million. But today, the Jews rule the world by proxy,” alluding to the old charge of overwhelming Jewish power in the United States.

Indeed, this is not the first time that Jewish influences in the United States are alleged to have conquered American media, politics and society, and to have held hostage American foreign policy in the Middle East. Yet this time around, the vision is particularly widespread and articulated almost with impunity, even by leading world politicians, in particular, with regard to the alleged domination of Jewish neo-conservatives in the American Bush Administration. In recent years, we have witnessed a former German Defence Minister and a French Foreign Minister deploring the pernicious influence of Jews on U.S. foreign policy, Virginia Democratic Congressman James P. Moran, Jr. accusing Jewish “neoconservatives” within the White House of driving the United States toward war in Iraq, and failed U.S. presidential candidate Pat Buchanan claiming that the American conservative movement has been “hijacked” by predominantly Jewish neo-conservatives—an accusation that in various forms has gained currency both in the U.S. and abroad, so much so that U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell felt compelled in testimony before a House Appropriations Subcommittee to deny in March, 2003 that a Jewish cabal was behind the Bush administration’s confrontation with Iraq. At the same time, many in the Islamic world continue to blame Israel and the Jews for the attacks of September 11th and—in odd common cause with Buchanan and his allies—credit Jewish neo-conservative puppet-masters with having pulled the strings behind the U.S.’s ouster of Saddam Hussein.

Normally when allegations of secret cabals and widespread conspiracies are made, it is best to let them pass by in silence or at the box office; for to address them is to confer upon them a kind of legitimacy as opinions worthy of engagement: One does not invite the American Nazi party—or, more to the point, Lyndon Larouche—to take part in Presidential debates. One can as a rule so disregard them because the accusations are outlandish, the evidence is nonexistent and the spokespeople are manifest extremists. Having a certain faith in the good sense of the people, democracy gives freedom to all, confident that the people will not be tempted by such ranting and raving. They can be discounted by the people as the price of its liberty. Yet when the allegations are no longer the exclusive preserve of a lunatic fringe, when they gain widespread acceptance among the respectable, it is necessary to examine them critically, i.e., not dismissively.

While some of the specific allegations may have originated on Larouche’s website, they were quickly picked up by such “respectable” outlets as the New York Times and the New Yorker. And as we write in late 2003, more than half a year after the specific allegations first appeared, they continue to be regurgitated in...
various guises, in mainstream journals such as *Newsweek* and in what might be termed “mainstream websites” such as “Arts and Letters Daily” and “Opendemocracy.net,” to say nothing of regional media outlets. Moreover, the opinions of the already mentioned ministerial spokesmen in Europe have found expression—and continue to find it—in leading European newspapers as well, most notably *Le Monde.* Similarly, *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd asserted that “Influential Jewish conservatives inside and outside the administration have been fierce in supporting a war on Saddam, thinking it could help Israel by scrambling the Middle East map and encouraging democracy.” Thus a stance on the Jewish question that was once the preserve of the “Arab street” or the American far right has wended its way into the liberal mainstream, including the Jewish left-leaning intellectual outlet *Tikkun* magazine.

We therefore propose a serious consideration of the claim that a global network of Jewish opinion has found particular expression in the “neoconservative” cast of current U.S. foreign policy. Two assumptions are at the root of this widespread apprehension regarding Jewish influence on U.S. foreign policy. The first assumption is that Jewish opinion is cohesive enough to find expression in a specific opinion or policy; the second is that neoconservatism is essentially Jewish, or at least that its origins and purposes are more Jewish than anything else. Indeed, a clear appraisal of the relationship between neoconservatism and the Jews suggests just the contrary of the usual bromides: neoconservatism’s understanding and defence of liberal democracy is, and always has been, most congenial to Jewish “interests” precisely because there is a harmony between liberal-democratic principles and Jewish political experiences (intolerance) and aspirations (excellence). Certainly such harmony exists also in the minds of Jewish liberals who oppose neoconservatism precisely on the grounds that it fosters the intolerance and exclusionary politics that form Jewish experiences in the diaspora, including that in the United States.

I. Who Speaks for the Jews? The Controversy in the United States

The more outrageous assertions of a global Jewish conspiracy explicitly entail the belief in a monolithic Jewish opinion regarding all matters pertaining to the Jewish people; less outrageous, and therefore more insidious, claims tacitly assume that what’s good for Israeli Jews is good for diasporic Jews everywhere (and vice versa), and that by and large all Jews more or less agree on what those good things are. Indeed, as we shall see, one need not harbour hostility toward Jews to speak and act on the premise that Jews are more or less of one mind and speak with one voice. Yet all these assertions sweep past the manifest public divisions—indeed, public acrimony—within world Jewry to posit a private unity of opinion and purpose that somehow defies exposure.

Interestingly, mainstream American media felt compelled in recent years to discuss neo-conservative Jewish influence, even if they defensively conclude that the diversity of American Jewish voices makes such a “Jewish” perspective chimerical. Yet, the very fact that they make the issue problematic, shows not only how deeply ingrained the fears of Jewish power are, but also inadvertently give credence to those charges.
To gauge accurately the validity of this assertion of Jewish unity, one must take a step back and ask the question, *Who speaks for the Jews, and with what authority?* This question entails many others. When a prominent Jew outside of Israel pronounces on the core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, how legitimate, relevant and representative is his intervention? Who has the ‘right’ to speak? Who listens and what are the consequences? What do diaspora Jews have the ‘right’ to do politically? What is their responsibility with respect to their fellow citizens, the state of Israel and diaspora Jews in other countries? Is there in fact a sharp dichotomy between ‘loyal’ and ‘critical’ political expression? Answers to these questions, it turns out, are as pertinent to Jewish self-understanding as they are to the question of worldwide Jewish influence.

In the United States, key politically liberal Jewish voices decry what they see as the hijacking of Jewish institutional prestige and other community political resources by the right-wing leadership of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, the body which since the 1950s has had the mandate of many Jewish organizations to speak to governments on their behalf on the major political issues of the day. Conference Chairman Mort Zuckerman and Executive Vice-Chairman Malcolm Hoenlein have repeatedly released statements echoing the political positions of Israeli Prime Minister Sharon’s Likud party, despite the fact that the Conference is supposed to reflect consensus and that many of the Conference’s member organizations disagree substantively with Sharon on a variety of issues.

Hoenlein issued a statement praising the Israeli government’s controversial closure of Palestinian moderate Sari Nusseibeh’s Jerusalem office, and attacking Nusseibeh’s record. He did so without consulting other Jewish American leaders, such as Eric Yoffie, President of the organization with the largest membership in the Conference (United American Hebrew Congregations, the umbrella body of Reform Judaism), and someone who has been far more critical of the Israeli government. In the pages of the Jewish American weekly *Forward,* Yoffie called for serious institutional reform of the Conference; while former Conference Chairman Theodore Mann called for it to be abolished outright. In November 2002 Yoffie issued a call to American Jews to exert their political influence in the U.S. in order to push the American administration to be more aggressive in pressuring Israel to freeze all settlements in the West Bank.

Critics have argued that these men have neither the authority nor the right to make such statements on behalf of the Jewish communities they purport to lead and/or to represent. This issue has significance beyond the internal debates within the American Jewish community (though these matters are important in and of themselves), as the debates themselves extend beyond state boundaries, and revive questions of how Jews relate to each other on the international level—community to community—and who speaks for whom, and with what authority.

These questions are particularly acute now, when diasporic intervention in Israeli politics—across the political spectrum—is becoming commonplace and even delves into domains that Israelis had jealously guarded in the past, including most notably that of security. Leading Israeli figures such as the former National Security Council head Uzi Dayan have called for a new relationship between Israel and the diaspora that explicitly acknowledges mutual political involvement and a security partnership. Such a partnership would, however, inherently imply the right of each side to criticize the other’s stands and intervene in what had heretofore been considered the other’s internal affairs.

Why do so many diaspora Jewish figures take it upon themselves to express publicly their views on Israeli policies, and should Israelis and other Jews care? The Jewish nation embodies the paradox of a closely bonded
people dispersed globally, unified by a compelling sense of common destiny but not by a common national political (or religious) authority and certainly not by common opinion. Strong kinship ties, of course, are not unique to Jews. Yet the multiple strands making up Jewish ties—among them religion, tradition, culture, family, preservation of the memory of the Holocaust, and attachment to the land of Israel—have been complemented by a generally hostile external environment that often precludes other attachments, and by international opinion that exaggerates and mistrusts the political efficacy and unity of the Jewish communities of the world.

The situation of American Jews is somewhat anomalous. Their external environment is rarely hostile—and never overtly so—and they largely share the talent of their fellow citizens in turning a deaf ear to the inanities of international opinion. However, the comfortable and influential status they have gained in their country is arguably as consequential for world Jewry as the resumption of Jewish sovereignty in Israel. To begin with, their prosperity has enabled them to assume a world leadership role by providing smaller Jewish communities elsewhere everything from educational funding and leadership training to political intercession on behalf of Jewish human rights. Yet the same prosperity that enables them to assist external Jewish communities is not without its own considerable inconveniences. Or more precisely, the perception abroad of that prosperity and its attendant benefits leads to considerable inconveniences for the Jewish communities that enjoy its largesse. These inconveniences, or dangers, are especially acute today when characteristically shrill and hysterical voices attribute to American Jews authorship of U.S. foreign policy in many domains.16

French Jews who fear for the safety of their Israeli kin and wish to express solidarity with them must be careful to establish their bona fides in the context of widespread French hostility to Israel, by stressing their opposition to certain Israeli policies and their allegiance to “European” norms and values. However, they must now go even further and establish their distance from a purportedly far more serious threat to Europe. For, they are not only under suspicion of greater loyalty to Israel but, as former French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine charged in April 2002, of the potentially more damning sin of being beholden to the dictates of an American Jewish community that commands U.S. foreign policy through its alleged control of the American government and media.

Israel and the United States, with Jewish populations of approximately five and six million respectively, constitute the two major centers of Jewry today. Though the impact of Israel and American Jewry on the two to three million Jews residing in other nations is often direct and powerful, there is no formal mechanism for consultation amongst these communities. As a result communication and cooperation is ad hoc and often haphazard, and even on quintessentially European Jewish issues the loudest Jewish voices heard are often Israeli and American. In 2003 Israeli leaders such as Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and ex-Foreign Minister Shimon Peres did not consult with French Jewish leaders before issuing statements regarding the waves of anti-Semitic attacks in France.7 From their vantage point in Jerusalem, Prime Minister Sharon condemned French anti-Semitism, while the ex-Foreign Minister insisted that such a phenomenon did not exist. In July 2002, at a time when some Jewish Americans called for a boycott of France (see, e.g. www.boycottfrance.com), American Jewish Committee representatives visited Paris and gave the French government a clean bill of health for its efforts in fighting anti-Semitism—though by the end of the month American Jewish Congress President Jack Rosen was once again criticizing France in this regard. Each of the American Jewish organizations purported to represent the community, while discrediting and undermining the others.

Why do so many diaspora Jewish figures take it upon themselves to express publicly their views on Israeli policies, and should Israelis and other Jews care? The Jewish nation embodies the paradox of a closely bonded people dispersed globally, unified by a compelling sense of common destiny but not by a common national political (or religious) authority and certainly not by common opinion.
Similar incidents crop up regularly: When redevelopment threatened an old Jewish cemetery in Prague, there were clashes between American and Czech Jewish representatives over how to handle the affair. The surge of far-right parties in Swiss and Austrian national elections led Israeli President Moshe Katsav and other Israeli politicians to declare both countries unsafe for Jews and call upon their small Jewish communities to immigrate to Israel at once. The basic messages are the same, from Jerusalem or from New York and Washington: Israeli and American Jewish voices speak on behalf of the general interests of world Jewry, despite directly representing (or even merely potentially representing) only particular segments of it. In other words, the importance of the Israeli and American communities to the Jews of the world makes it possible to conflate their interests with those of world Jewry, or even to reduce the interests of all to their own particular interests.

The AJC, the Anti-Defamation League and other Jewish American organizations offer European Jewish communities assistance in building up their own political and other communal organizations, but reserve the right to intercede directly and unilaterally when they feel that Jewish American interests are affected. Similarly, Israel has almost always prioritized its bilateral relations with other countries’ governments over the self-expressed interests of the Jewish communities in those countries. At its 2002 annual gathering, the European Council of Jewish Communities affirmed its collective desire to attain the status of a “third pillar” of world Jewry, alongside their Israeli and American counterparts. The national boundaries that still divide Europe, the internal Jewish divisions within those boundaries, and the demographic imbalance with the larger Jewish communities make that goal an unlikely prospect in the foreseeable future.

Deliberation within a particular national Jewish community is often difficult enough to imagine and implement, let alone among Jewish communities worldwide or vis-à-vis Israel. It must be noted, however, that this observation does not hold with regard to more traditionally religious Jews, who tend to be more insular and less internally diverse: these characteristics allow, for example, Agudat Israel Olami largely to succeed in coordinating elements of Jewish communities across national and continental boundaries.

In the absence of such consultative tools among the various Diaspora communities—and it is difficult to conceive of how they should be or could be constituted—Israeli and American Jews are likely to continue speaking on behalf of world Jewry, without substantive representation in their decision-making from communities on the periphery. Many European Jews oppose what they see as Israeli and American Jewish efforts to deny the legitimacy of Jewish life in Europe. Just as Europeans in general need yet resent American intervention and envy and resent American power, European Jews often feel the same way about their American counterparts. French Jewish scholar Diana Pinto, for example, rejects “Israel’s self-proclaimed ‘copyright’ to the Jewish people.” This opposition is unlikely to change, or to change anything.

However bitter Jewish intercommunity relations may become, they are more than matched by the vituperation of the inter-American debate amongst Jewish organizations. Consider the battle for control and consultation within the U.S. Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations. The Presidents’ Conference is perceived by non-Jews, including a long line of American administrations, as the official voice of the largest Jewish community in the world, and that is not a light responsibility. Its standing is such that the whole of American Jewry is largely attributed responsibility for its pronouncements, without regard for the fact that rarely, if ever, is Jewish opinion uniform on a matter of controversy.

Though some are not troubled in the least by this
state of affairs, other participants in the Conference are far from resigned to it; what admirers regard as strong and inspiring leadership, they view as an emergent cult of personalities.21 Another question raised by this particular dispute is whether U.S. Jews should speak with a unified voice. Jewish American leaders and media often speak of pluralism and diversity of thought as a primary strength of their community, one which allows dissent to be channelled productively. And there are those, of course, who prefer that Jewish Americans not speak out at all on foreign policy. Scholars such as Tony Smith22 and Michael Lind23 and politicians such as Cynthia McKinney24 allege that “Jewish influence” has a corrosive and bellicose impact on U.S. foreign policy, distorting America’s true interests. Lind argues that the “Israel lobby” is too strong, and that Jewish American political voices should be ignored.

What is to be done? To be sure, American Jews are much more secure in exercising their political rights today, but they must remain attentive to challenges to their legitimacy as American political voices. The Forward reported in August 2002 that an article “in the left-wing magazine The Nation seems to make direct connection between Jews’ support for Israel and their support for an attack on Iraq, saying that ‘far-right Zionists’ are leading an ‘attack-Iraq chorus’ in the Bush administration.” The Nation’s allegations recall nothing so much as Buchanan’s notorious comments prior to the first gulf war about the Israeli Defense Ministry’s “amen corner in the United States.”25

We thus see another example of the one area where the far left and the far right can always find common cause. The Forward also noted in the same issue that none of the fifteen Jewish organizations it had contacted had yet adopted an official stand on a possible war against Iraq, despite consultations by Hoenlein and Zuckerman geared toward producing a united stand in the Presidents’ Conference. The idea of monolithic and pivotal Jewish support for Iraq wended its way into the mainstream U.S. media, with the Los Angeles Times reporting that “Jewish lawmakers and defenders of Israel tend to be more hawkish.”26 As the Forward pointed out in a subsequent editorial, however, Jewish supporters of Israel were also among the leading opponents of the President’s policy, including Senators Boxer, Feinstein, Levin, Feingold and Wellstone.27 The editorial points out Jewish sensitivity to accusations of wielding excessive power, as well as the necessity felt by many Jews to establish or reaffirm their pluralist credentials. Furthermore, although it was not played up by the mainstream media, polls showed that the strongest supporters of the war in Iraq were not Jews but Christian conservatives.28 Indeed, the last point may demonstrate a correlation between support for the war on Iraq and support for Israel and it is possible, and most likely, true, that Christian conservatives are more supportive of Israel than are American Jews as a whole.

It cannot be said that Jewish communities—or even a significant portion of them chose these spokesmen. No American Jewish community selected Hoenlein or Zuckerman. No Jewish ‘leader’ or ‘spokesperson’ is elected by the Jews of his country, except for the government leaders of Israel. ‘Chief rabbis’ and other clerical leaders are the appointees of politicians or of small coteries of clerics, not of the individuals comprising the Jewish community, and not even of congregants. Even within many ‘mass’ Jewish organizations open to the general Jewish public, executives are chosen not by the general membership but by nominating committees composed of professional staff and/or wealthy donors. In fact, the central role played by philanthropy in Jewish community life means that money is a central determinant of who gets to make use of the institutional prestige of venerable organizational names in order to obtain a platform for his views.29

As for the legitimacy of Jewish spokespeople and the significance attributed to their views, many detractors—and even friends—of Israel and the Jews already believe...
that Jewish opinion, communities and institutions are far more unified than they truly are, even monolithic. They also believe that American Jews are influential to the point of holding the key to access to the U.S. government. While the perception of an overwhelming and unified Jewish power regarding the war in Iraq was far from reality, it must be acknowledged that Jewish organizations are critical players on matters concerning U.S. foreign relations such as the enlargement of NATO and the Transatlantic alliance between the United States and Germany.

All and all, the perception of Jewish power in Washington, which Jewish organizations like to nourish as much as they try to shy away from it, is responsible for situations such as the Turkish Prime Minister going to the American Jewish Committee seeking assistance in lobbying the U.S. Congress, or the Romanian President who calls upon Israelis to activate their “powerful friends” in Washington to advance Romania’s NATO aspirations. These foreign leaders already act as if a unified, worldwide Jewish political body exists, and treat diasporic Jewish spokespeople, particularly American organizations (like AIPAC, the American Jewish Committee, and the ADL) as though they carry the full mandate and power of worldwide Jewry, and therefore also that of the United States.

Enemies of Israel and the Jews display the same belief. Whether they attempt to ingratiate themselves with Jewish leaders in order to improve their standing in the West, particularly in the United States, or, as in the case of conservative clerics in Iran, they abuse local Jews and prevent the entry into the country of diasporic Jewish representatives in order to distance the possibility of rapprochement with the United States.30

This survey of contending Jewish groups reveals that while Jews obviously share kinship ties as well as similar internal and external pressures, controversy nonetheless abounds as to who does and should speak for the Jews and as to what they ought to say. Such controversy does not flatly disprove the premise that a private unity of purpose somehow governs this diversity of opinion, but the diversity itself is so pronounced as to stretch nearly to the breaking point the already strained assumption of a concert of Jewish opinion and influence.

II. The Present Controversy concerning Neoconservatism and the Jews

Unlike many Jewish spokesmen, official, self-appointed or otherwise, neoconservatives, as a rule, do not claim to speak on behalf of the Jews, nor are they all Jewish. The question therefore arises as to the precise relationship between neoconservatives and the Jews. However, in the very rush to indict, if not convict, “neoconservatism” as the Jewish power behind the American imperial throne, there has been insufficient attention paid to the question of what neoconservatism is. For it is by no means clear what that definition is, especially when what today is frequently called neoconservatism differs immensely with the first generation of self-conscious neoconservatives. Nor is it even entirely clear who is and who is not a “neoconservative” at least insofar as many, perhaps most, of the individuals who are identified as neoconservatives do not so regard themselves.31 For this reason, among others, it is both commonly and plausibly suggested that use of the term “neoconservatism” functions as a veiled reference to Jewish conservatives. Though we believe there is much to this suggestion, especially in regard to claims about ascribed private influence and motivations, it does not explain what one may call the public face of neoconservatism.

Undeniably, neoconservatism has enjoyed an unprecedented prominence at certain points during the last few years. Neoconservatives are said to be everything from forthright policymakers within the White House to a secret cabal running American foreign policy. Neoconservatives act, we are told, to further goals ranging from the establishment of a new American
empire to the promotion of the policies of the militaristic and unenlightened administration of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Underlying many of these analyses, sometimes overtly avowed and sometimes merely insinuated, is the contention that the neoconservatives, many of whom as noted are Jewish, are guilty of dual loyalty, or even disloyalty to the U.S. So-called “paleoconservatives” contend that neoconservatives send American troops to die for a battle that is not America’s. Yet it is not simply in America that the influence of neoconservatives is decried. Voices, often hysterical, have been raised in Europe—France and Germany in particular—lambasting neoconservatives for driving a wedge between the U.S. and its European allies, and more recently neoconservatives have even been identified in China as potential instigators of a new American-Chinese rift.

We do not simply contend that these claims are unfounded nonsense (though most are). The issue for us is rather a lack of clarity due the almost complete absence of a substantive definition of neoconservatism. To elucidate the meaning of neoconservatism, we pay special attention to the persistent question of the relationship of neoconservative prescriptions and Jewish interests, for this poisonous identification threatens to undermine thoughtful debate before it can begin.

Even before sprouting the prefixes “neo-” and “paleo,” “conservatism” was a term notoriously difficult to define. Part of the reason for this is the many, often loud pretenders and contenders claiming to be the rightful heir to the mantle of the true representative of the oddly named “conservative movement.” In the U.S. alone one encounters traditional or paleo-conservatives, the new or Christian right, and libertarian conservatives, to say nothing of the largely moribund dixie conservatives. Taking a step or two outside of the U.S. and the immediate context, one can find so-called progressive conservatives, various kinds of Tories, the original throne and altar conservatives of the 19th century, and so on. To this mix, the first generation of neoconservatives was added—or added themselves—in the 1970s. These pioneers were a group of disaffected liberals, “liberals mugged by reality” in Irving Kristol’s famous description, who broke with the Democratic Party because of disillusionment with the failures of The Great Society and, even more, the post-Vietnam breakdown of the bipartisan anti-communist consensus that had prevailed since the end of World War II.

Unlike conservatism, neoconservatism does not suffer from a surfeit of champions. There are no arguments, at least among neoconservatives, over whom is most or most authentically neoconservative. In fact, there have been and are today very few prominent neoconservatives who identify themselves as such. Originally “neoconservatism” was intended as a term of derision: “the name neo-conservative was not chosen by [neoconservatives] but fastened on them by their enemies and former friends.”

In good contrarian style, Irving Kristol eventually adopted the term; yet by his account the term is of limited political applicability, “more a descriptive term than a prescriptive one.” From his thematic definition at the outset of his *Neoconservatism: the Autobiography of an Idea*, one might even conclude that the term’s chief value is sociological:

> It describes the erosion of liberal faith among a relatively small but talented and articulate group of scholars and intellectuals, and the movement of this group (which gradually gained many new recruits) toward a more conservative point of view: conservative, but different in certain important respects from the traditional conservatism of the Republican party. We were, most of us, from lower middle-class or working-class families, children of the Great Depression, veterans (literal or not)
of World War II, who accepted the New Deal in principle, and had little affection for the kind of isolationism that then permeated American conservatism. We regarded ourselves originally as dissident liberals—dissident because we were skeptical of many of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society initiatives and increasingly disbelieving of the liberal metaphysics, the view of human nature and of social and economic realities, on which those programs were based.35

To the extent one accepts Kristol’s account as authoritative, one might be led to conclude that neoconservatism is a thing of the past, an idea that arose in response to peculiar political conditions that have no analogues today. To this claim of built-in obsolescence one might reply that what is politically important is not the journey but the end: neoconservatism propounds a different kind of conservatism, and it is that kind of conservatism that needs to be defined. From that point of view, what would be important about neoconservatism is the manner in which it differs from traditional American conservatism and liberalism. Before turning to a less personal definition of neoconservatism, let us note three peculiarities of Kristol’s account: 1) the journey of Kristol and his intellectual friends mirrors almost exactly that taken by the decidedly non-intellectual Ronald Reagan in his journey from the Democratic to the Republican party; 2) in making this journey, Kristol and the neoconservatives both made conservatism intellectually respectable and made many conservatives more respectful of intellectuals, and 3) Kristol’s silence in this context about his Judaism—to say nothing about the question of Israel36—indicates that he does not see an essential relationship between being Jewish and being neoconservative.

Another description of neoconservatism is that of a scholar who moved from 1960s liberalism to conservatism yet for some reason escaped the label, Harvey C. Mansfield. Neoconservatives, says Mansfield:

have given themselves over to social science with a supplement of common sense (a mix of oil and water if ever there was one), and they stay away from philosophy. The Public Interest proclaims that the public interest is ‘not some kind of pre-existing, platonic idea’ as if big ideas rather than wrong ones were the source of our trouble. This allergy—for it is not thought out as a conservative critique of the power of reason—perhaps accounts for the peculiar backward motion of the neo-conservative movement, always glaring indignantly at those from whom it is retreating and never turning around to salute and embrace those into whom it is retreating.37

Mansfield’s characteristically acute account points to an essential shortcoming of the first generation of neoconservatives, yet it seems out of place in the current controversy over neoconservatives.38 Today’s neoconservatives are self-confident and assertive. They are not allergic to big ideas or, alternately, they are not loath to have recourse to principles. One might say that because today’s leading neoconservatives grew up for the most part simply as conservatives, they don’t have the crisis of conscience, hesitancies and ambivalences characteristic of the first generation.

In the process of describing what neoconservatism was, we have come to see that in many important respects what neoconservatism is today—or at least is thought to be—differs considerably in two ways. First, neoconservatism originally was chiefly concerned with domestic policy; neoconservatism is today regarded almost exclusively as a doctrine of foreign policy.39 Though it goes without saying that current neoconservatives have much to say about domestic as well as foreign policy, for all practical purposes no one today...
makes a distinction between neoconservative and conservative domestic policy. In the debate over stem cells, for example, in which a number of neoconservative voices have been prominent, even the most conspiratorially minded do not raise the spectre of government by a right wing intellectual clique, let alone by a stealthy cabal.40

Second, today’s neoconservatives are far less enamoured of “realism”—whether it takes the form of realpolitik in foreign policy or empirical social science—than were their predecessors. Though respectful and appreciative of liberal democracy, the “old” neoconservatives were reluctant to appeal to its principles, perhaps chastened by the emptiness of 1970s appeals to “human rights.” The new neoconservatives view liberal democratic principles as a guide to be consulted when determining the proper conduct of foreign policy.

Note the marked contrast to the most famous first generation statement of neoconservative foreign policy, Jeane Kirkpatrick’s Commentary article on “Dictatorships and Double Standards”—an article that reads today almost as if it were a brief against the war against the tyrannical regime of Saddam Hussein. No doubt one can overstate the difference between neoconservatism then and neoconservatism now: today’s neoconservatives applaud the staunch resistance to Soviet tyranny characteristic of their predecessors. Nevertheless, the differing emphasis on the role of principle in policy formation is noteworthy. In the absence of a pressing necessity such as opposition to communism, one might find that the theoretical differences dividing the two types is of decisive practical importance. No doubt it was with these differences in mind that William Kristol and Robert Kagan identified President George W. Bush as a “neoconservative,” as opposed to a “conservative”:

For if there is a single principle that today divides neoconservatism from traditional

American conservatism, it is the conviction that the promotion of liberal democracy abroad is both a moral imperative and a profound national interest. This is a view of America’s role in the world that has found little favor in the Republican party since the days of Theodore Roosevelt. Reagan was a modern exception—the product, no doubt, of his own roots as a Truman Democrat—but this aspect of Reaganism was largely abandoned by Republicans after 1989. And so we are not surprised to see traditional Republican conservatives, of whom there is no more esteemed intellectual spokesman than George Will, now denouncing the supposed folly of such ambitious ventures. Nor are we surprised that in Bush’s own cabinet, neither his secretary of state nor his secretary of defense shares the president’s commitment to liberal democracy, either in Iraq or in the Middle East more generally. Indeed, the only thing that surprises us, a little, is the failure of American liberals—and European liberals—to embrace a cause that ought to be close to their hearts.41

The crucial difference between the old and new neoconservatives is the primacy for the latter of liberal democratic principles.

Having gained clarity as to meaning of the term “neoconservative,” we are now in a position to consider the alleged connection between neoconservatives and Jews: Do Jewish neoconservatives self-consciously speak as Jews and for Jews? As argued above, often a particularly Jewish dimension is added. Many assert that neoconservatives are disproportionately Jewish, and, as such, are suspect because their allegiance to their religious and ethnic identity presumably trumps their concern for the common good. In particular, the more or less explicit charge is that Jewish
neoconservatives are animated above all by their over-
riding concern for Israel. Even respectable authors
allude heavy-handedly to anonymous neoconservatives
as a pro-Israeli fifth column. Stanley Hoffmann, for
example, in an article in the *New York Review of
Books* denounced the Bush administration, asserting:
“In the Defense Department, the civilian coterie of
neoconservatives and hard-line pro-Israeli hawks has
promoted a grandiose fantasy of using Iraq as the
model for democratizing the Muslim world.”

A necessary (albeit insufficient) condition of an
adequate response to such suggestions of a Jewish-
neoconservatism connection is the recognition that by
no means are all leading neoconservatives Jewish, as
the mere mention of the names of Jeane Kirkpatrick,
William Bennett, James Q. Wilson, Michael Novak and
Richard John Neuhaus, all first-generation neoconser-
vatives, shows. It is not accidental that this list of
prominent non-Jewish neoconservatives consists solely
of the first generation. Indeed, the majority of those
individuals most prominently identified as neoconservatives of the second generation today, are Jewish, a fact
that not one of them obscures. But the question arises
whether there is an affinity, and what kind, between
neoconservatism and Judaism?

To begin with, it is only within the last few years,
that many of the second generation learned they were
neoconservative, having mistakenly regarded themselves
throughout their adult lives simply as conservatives or
Republicans. Almost none of these newly outed neocons are Jewish. Importantly, authors like George
F. Will—as hard-line a supporter of Israel as any
hawk—would have to be classified as neoconservative.
But he isn’t. It is hard to avoid the suspicion that many
people—unwilling or unable to counter neoconservative
prescriptions in debate—hope to undermine the neo-
conservative position by casting aspersions on its
motivations. To the extent this is the case, it is a possible
explanation for the current identification of neocon-
ervatism as a foreign policy doctrine: it is, to use our
earlier example, difficult to find a specifically Jewish
motivation for opposition to stem cell research.

Yet, in discussing the relationship between neocon-
servative and Jewish voices one must always keep in
mind the simple distinction between those who do and
do not claim to speak as and for Jews. The chief foreign
policy outlet for the first generation of neoconservatives
was *Commentary*, a publication of the American Jewish
Committee, and *Commentary* devoted (and devotes)
more space to questions concerning Israel than do most
leading journals of opinion. Even given the natural
tendency to be concerned with one’s kin, it should be
noted that in discussing the question of Israel the
contributors to *Commentary* do not make what would
be the manifestly false claim that they are speaking for
the American Jewish community. Moreover, if the
Jewishness of neoconservatives is such a powerful
determinant of their opinions on Israel and related
matters is it at all clear why only a minority of American
Jews share their hawkish views on Mideast politics.

Though there are very prominent exceptions, such as
Norman Podhoretz and Elliot Abrams, Jewish neocon-
servatives do not characteristically present them-
selves or wish to be viewed as representing a Jewish
voice. Importantly, the neoconservative point of view
is a distinctly American one, animated by a love of and
felt need to defend American liberal democracy. In an
article written for *The Weekly Standard* in response to
this controversy, Irving Kristol even identified
neoconservatism as “the first variant of American
conservatism in the past century that is in the ‘American
grain.’ It is hopeful, not lugubrious; forward-looking,
not nostalgic; and its general tone is cheerful, not grim
or dyspeptic. Its 20th-century heroes tend to be TR,
FDR, and Ronald Reagan.” He also suggests that it
fosters “attitudes” conducive to principled patriotism,
distrust of policies that tend toward or hope for world
government, and clarity regarding friends and enemies.
His son William Kristol goes a step beyond characterization of neoconservatism’s moods and attitudes, offering a substantive definition of neoconservatism. He avers that neoconservatism’s defining characteristic is “a kind of Tocquevillean esteem for the freedom and justice afforded by American liberal democracy combined with a Tocquevillean determination to seek out remedies for that democracy’s inherent failings,” especially its egalitarian tendency to erode standards of excellence. Their conviction that liberal democracy both possesses the necessary conditions for overcoming its inherent difficulties and offers unparalleled freedom and democratic justice inspires neoconservatives’ efforts to seek to bring liberal democracy to countries in which it does not yet exist and defend those in which it is already present. From this perspective, the connection—insofar as one exists—between neoconservatives’ solicitude for both U.S. and Israeli interests is their concern for the health of liberal democracy.

New light is thus shed on one of the most dubious and potentially damaging elements of the alleged connection between neoconservatism and the Jews: the present controversy regarding the Bush administration’s foreign policy. It has been widely reported that a “cabal”—a term redolent with anti-Jewish overtones—is the driving force behind the United States’ aggressive and ultimately imperialist strategy. Though this charge comes in many forms, the essential claim is that neoconservatives have somehow hijacked control of the foreign policy of George W. Bush’s administration solely for the sake of Israeli interests. What is most remarkable about these changes is the fact that they fail to recognize that it is no pliant promoter of the current Israeli Government’s ends. How can one explain that top Administration officials including Paul Wolfowitz, now advocate what is, in effect, a foreign policy of the Israeli Left, the Aylon-Nusseiba agreement?

To be sure, the Bush Administration has been a friend of Israel, but that is unremarkable in the context of American politics. In fact, in the light of 9/11 and the newfound American appreciation of the dangers of Arab terrorism, one might have expected the Bush Administration to jettison dealings with Yasser Arafat—the founding father of contemporary Arab terrorism—if not the Palestinian authority altogether. Even after 9/11 and in the face of unabated Palestinian terror directed against Israel, it took the Bush Administration almost nine months to come to the realization that Arafat was not a viable partner for peace. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Bush in fact became the first American president ever to call for the establishment of a Palestinian state, one whose borders will include what are now Israeli settlements in the West Bank. To the delight of such groups as the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, on October 2, 2001 President Bush stated, “The idea of a Palestinian state has always been a part of a vision, so long as the right of Israel to exist is respected.”

Colin Powell gave a speech less than two months later calling for the establishment of a Palestinian state and the end of Israeli “occupation.” Only after Israel suffered four terrorists attacks on December 2, 2001—three in Jerusalem that killed 10 people and a bus bombing in Haifa that killed 14—did the White House respond to Israel’s reprisals against terrorist groups by saying “Israel has a right to defend herself.” Given the virtually unanimous reaction of prior American administrations urging Israel to show “restraint” in the face of terrorist attacks, the Bush Administration’s response caused something of a sensation. Nevertheless, its resolve soon faltered, so that almost immediately its characteristic response reverted to that of its predecessors.

One can multiply examples of this sort. When speaking of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict generally, the Bush Administration tends to couple its calls for an end to Palestinian terror with an insistence on the dismantlement of such structural obstacles to peace as...
checkpoints, settlements and “occupation.” It has continually opposed so-called “hard line” Israeli positions, such as the construction of a security fence along the West Bank and the expulsion of Arafat. Clearly, in all these areas as well as others, matters of central and pressing concern to Israel and the Sharon government, the Bush Administration has more or less consistently acted in a manner impossible to reconcile with the alleged neoconservative conspiracy.

Most prominent is the famous “road map” to peace. The Bush Administration—receptive to the appointment of Abu Mazen as Palestinian Prime Minister—foisted this plan on Israel while Arafat retained control of the Palestinian security services, which virtually guaranteed that no effective Palestinian action against groups such as Hamas would take place. The premise of the road map certainly appealed to neoconservative sensibilities in that it set forth as the precondition for serious negotiations radical reform in the Palestinian Authority and the end of the Arafat era.

In his speech of June 24, 2002, Bush called for such reform and neoconservatives such as Charles Krauthammer applauded: “The president’s speech on the Middle East this week unveiled a radically new idea that goes far beyond the ‘Arafat has to go’ headlines... President Bush went far beyond the obvious. He dared to apply the fundamental principle of American foreign policy—the promotion of democracy—to the one area where it has always been considered verboten: the Middle East.” Employing Krauthammer—perhaps the most vocal and eloquent neoconservative voice on behalf of Israel—as a guide, one can see that neoconservative hopes were not foremost in the mind of the Bush Administration in formulating the plan that had its inception in the June 2002 speech.

Shortly after Bush set forth the details of the road map on April 30, 2003, Krauthammer spoke of Arafat as “The Roadblock on the Road Map,” and a month later he accused the Bush administration of “forcing the unilateral surrender of Israel.” When in December 2003, Powell announced his readiness to meet with architect of the Oslo Accords, Yossi Beilin, and Arafat loyalist, Yasser Abed Rabo, who crafted the so-called “Geneva Accord,” Krauthammer wrote that the Administration’s behaviour was “scandalous.”

Although Krauthammer powerfully set forth what doubtless would be the consensus neoconservative position on the road map, he is, in a sense, exceptional because most neoconservatives have not placed Israel at the immediate forefront of their concerns during the course of the Bush Administration. To wit, since its inception in 1997 the neoconservative think-tank The Project for the New American Century—the target of countless spiteful and ignorant attacks over the past year—is not, despite what one may have read, an organization whose raison d’etre is the influencing of American policy in the Mideast; it has rather devoted the lion’s share of its efforts to advocating more forceful American opposition to the tyrannical regime in China. In 2003 The Weekly Standard, perhaps the most influential voice of neoconservatism, has concentrated not on Israel, but on Iraq. It has done so not out of a concern for Israel, but for reasons connected to the responsibilities of the United States as the world’s foremost power—a power that can live up to those responsibilities only if it acts in accord with the principles informing its liberal democratic way of life.

If the charge of a Jewish neoconservative conspiracy is rendered doubtful by the Bush administration’s failure to do Israel’s bidding, its truthfulness is further strained by perhaps the most common, most pernicious and certainly the most unlikely form in which the has been set forth of late: namely, that the cabal is being led by the students of the political philosopher Leo Strauss. According to this charge, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz is, with a handful of like-minded subordinates, co-ordinating the Bush Administration’s foreign policy in accord with the wishes of Strauss, who
died in 1973 and whose writings barely touch upon then contemporary foreign policy concerns. A telling example appeared in a *New York Times* “Week in Review” article, replete with a cartoon on page one of Wolfowitz decked out in the garb of a Roman centurion; then on page four Wolfowitz’s photo is plotted on a handy chart connecting more than a dozen public figures to Leo Strauss, a political philosopher who taught at the University of Chicago in the 50’s and 60’s.

An émigré from Germany who had, the *Times* notes, “converted to Zionism” in his youth, Leo Strauss attracted a large and devoted following of students who went on to become (and in turn produce) eminent academics as well as helped shape, albeit to widely varying extents, the thought of such prominent political figures as William Kristol and Wolfowitz. At the center of the storm is Wolfowitz, who in Atlas’s words “has been identified as a disciple of Strauss.” Atlas’s description is telling both in its unquestioning acceptance of the anonymous “identification” and his employment of the term “disciple” (rather than, say, “student”). However, although Wolfowitz did take two courses with Strauss as a graduate student in Chicago as well as some courses with “Straussian” professors, his own academic work in national security and strategy studies bears no resemblance to that of Strauss or his students.

Of course, there is no denying that Strauss or Straussians may have influenced the thought of the unusually reflective Wolfowitz, yet there is a world of difference between influence and discipleship. This is to say nothing of Atlas’s somewhat vaguer and even more ridiculous identification of Bush administration policies as “being carried out in [Strauss’s] name.” Atlas does not—because he could not—provide one example of a Bush administration official saying anything that links Administration policy with Strauss. More tellingly, Atlas’s efforts to offer evidence suggesting that Strauss would approve of Bush administration policy did nothing more than betray his own inability to make heads or tails of Strauss’s notoriously difficult prose. Atlas’s article reflected the most conspicuous appearance in the United States of a charge that had been circulating rather heatedly throughout Europe, especially—and not surprisingly—in Germany and France already for a number of months. It was followed by similar articles in, among other places, *The New Yorker, The Boston Globe, The International Herald Tribune*, and *Newsweek*.

Yet Strauss is a convenient figure—an émigré Jew who was a Zionist in his youth and who is famous for his discussion of secretive means of communication. Just as Jewish conservatives have discovered that they are neoconservatives, neoconservatives are now discovering they are Straussians: for example, in Atlas’s and Hersh’s piece Richard Perle is—presumably for no other than his being Jewish and neoconservative—misidentified as a Straussian; similarly, Norman Podhoretz is wrongly identified as an “admirer of Strauss.” (Podhoretz in particular has never been anything but, at best, lukewarm towards Strauss.) Similarly, any number of people upon whom Strauss has had little or no influence—most Jewish—have been identified in various media outlets as “Straussians.”

The *New York Times* bestowed similar attention on Wolfowitz well before the present controversy in a biographical cover story in the Sunday Magazine in 2002. In general a thoughtful story that at least complicates (albeit without rebutting) the “Israel-centric” caricature of Wolfowitz, it nonetheless emphasized Wolfowitz’s “moralism” arising from his upbringing in a household deeply marked by the horrors of the Holocaust and America’s responsibility to prevent similar perils in the future. The reader is left to wonder about the motivations for Wolfowitz’s positions. Are his muscular and ambitious U.S. defense policies really for the sake of defending Israel?

Most egregiously, Seymour Hersh entered into the
realm of full-blown conspiracy theory in an exposé in an expose in issue of The New Yorker which ran in 2003. Hersh wrote of an allegedly secret cell in the Pentagon devoted to steering the Bush administration toward war in Iraq by means of skewed intelligence information. He details the connections between the secret cell’s leader, Abram Shulsky, Strauss and his student Allan Bloom. Later in 2003, the New York Times described Shulsky as “a neoconservative scholar.” There is little of substance in Hersh’s article than the suggestion that the Pentagon hired a few people to analyze intelligence, but its breathless and frequent use of words like “secrets” and “deception” has become part of the subsequent flap in the press and Congress as to whether Iraq’s WMD threat was exaggerated by, at least in part, the same intelligence cell.

Atlas and Hersh are but the two most prominent of countless American examples, to say nothing of the even more virulent German and French ones, asserting the existence of this Straussian conspiracy. Nor are these fantasies restricted to the European continent. Even in Britain, The Observer reported that “The Project For The New American Century,” a think tank consisting of less than a handful of people headed by William Kristol and Gary Schmitt, prepared a secret document for “world domination” that serves as the foundation for the Bush Administration’s foreign policy. The Observer’s perspective, however, was misplaced. Far from being a secret document, let alone one calling for world domination, the document in question was a public paper that PNAC circulated in an attempt to influence public opinion.

Undeniably, Strauss has influenced neoconservatism, but it is anything but the type of influence attributed to him. In an article published in 2003 by The Public Interest entitled “What Was Leo Strauss Up To?,” today’s most thoughtful neoconservative and perhaps the only one profoundly influenced by Strauss’s teaching, William Kristol noted that Strauss did not “offer formulas ready-made for implementation, or a ‘program.’” Rather, according to Kristol, “Strauss’s practical influence was at the broad level of how to conceive of politics and matters of public concern.” Accordingly, he concluded that so far from exercising a nefarious and secretive control over public affairs, to the limited extent Strauss sought to influence public affairs, he did so through reformation of public opinion. To this point Kristol wrote:

Strauss, for example, was well aware that the language in which problems are discussed and debated shapes the way they are understood. Accordingly, he sought to ensure that his readers thought and spoke about political matters in a language appropriate to political life. As we have noted, Strauss helped reintroduce the concept of tyranny to political and social science and, thus indirectly, to the broader political debate. And he did so for the best of reasons: “A social science that cannot speak of tyranny with the same confidence with which medicine speaks, for example, of cancer, cannot understand social phenomena as what they are.” Similarly, Strauss’s devastating critique of the distinction between “facts” and “values” has gradually made itself felt within contemporary political discourse: Virtues are now spoken of more often, and values less. And arguments that not too many years ago would have been dismissed as illegitimate attempts to “impose one’s values”—a semantic trick used to end debate on important matters before it can begin—are now more frequently acknowledged to raise serious questions of principle.

This failure to understand the public thrust of Strauss’s limited political efforts parallels a remarkable fact that...
How could such a movement hope to succeed? In trying to understand neoconservative influence one must begin from the fact that the neoconservative point of view is distinctly American, animated by a love of and felt need to defend American liberal democracy. It is precisely that principled love of American liberal democracy—and not their Jewish identification—that makes neoconservatives (Jewish and non-Jewish) strong supporters of Israeli liberal democracy.

is virtually unmentioned in the current controversy: namely, whatever influence neoconservatism has is almost directly the result of public speech—that is to say, so far from acting conspiratorially in the darkest recesses at the dead of night, neoconservatives have taken their case directly to the reading public and policymakers. If the neoconservatives’ critics have it right then it is our good fortune to witness the first conspiracy in the history of mankind that is open and public.

Consider the most prominent neoconservative outlets of opinion: The Public Interest, The Weekly Standard and The National Interest, their very names pronounce their intention to speak to and as Americans. These magazines are public enterprises meant to influence public opinion. As such it almost defies a hidden agenda; for it is one thing—however delusional—to speak of private manipulation of the reigns of power, it is quite another to advance a foreign agenda in a liberal democratic society by means of public speech. How could such a movement hope to succeed? In trying to understand neoconservative influence one must begin from the fact that the neoconservative point of view is distinctly American, animated by a love of and felt need to defend American liberal democracy. It is precisely that principled love of American liberal democracy—and not their Jewish identification—that makes neoconservatives (Jewish and non-Jewish) strong supporters of Israeli liberal democracy.

In sum, the neoconservatism of current U.S. foreign policy cannot be an instance of Jewish influence on world affairs because neoconservatism is not essentially Jewish and because Jewish opinion is not unified enough to guide the foreign policy of any state, let alone that of the U.S. where the discord of Jewish opinion is perhaps most pronounced. Yet a final suggestion is in order, a suggestion prompted by the recognition of the liberal democratic character of the American and Israeli governments and ways of life and by the preponderance of Jews among those who hold to the neoconservatism that reserves pride of place for a principled defence of liberal democracy.

It should come as no surprise that Jews as Jews would be attracted to a way of thinking that promotes and defends a robust form of liberal democracy. For toleration, as a principle and even as a virtue, thrives nowhere more than in a vibrant liberal democracy, and no liberal democracy more than the U.S. has in both principle and practice elevated toleration from the level of mere indulgence to that of respectful embrace of peoples who merit that embrace by comporting themselves “as good citizens in giving [their government] on all occasions their effectual support.”

When Washington extended that sentiment to the Jews of a single Rhode Island synagogue, he meant it as an expression of gratitude and as a pledge of mutual trust between the form of government he helped to found and all “the children of Abraham.” What people would be more vigilant of this elevated toleration and more inspired by the public spiritedness it both fosters and demands than the Jews? So if the attraction of a considerable number of Jews to a way of thought that prizes vibrant liberal democracy both at home and abroad would not have surprised Washington, perhaps it should not surprise us.
Notes

11. This point was manifested in a recent Washington Post article regarding the fear of an anti-Semitic backlash in light of allegations of Jewish influence in the Iraq war. The observation that Jewish Americans are “deeply divided over the wisdom of invading Iraq (and that) … Jewish groups have taken a broad range of positions. On the left, Rabbi Michael Lerner, head of the San Francisco-based Tikkun community, called for nonviolent civil disobedience if war breaks out. On the right, the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations declared in October that it supports the use of force. The far larger, centrist groups representing the bulk of Reform and Conservative Jews have straddled the fence, enforcing military action only if the United States exhausts all diplomatic alternatives.” Yet, the article goes on to analyze Jewish neo-conservative influence in the White House including Wolfowitz, Feith, Abrams, and Perle. See Alan Cooperman, “Jewish Organizations Worried About Backlash for Iraq War,” March 15, 2003.
16. These charges seem to have supplanted similar accusations that in past years were levelled against various Jewish organizations, most notably the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).
17. For more on anti-Jewish agitation in Europe, see http://www.wjc.org.il/publications/policy_dispatches/pub_dis575.html. See also Hillel Halkin.
18. Incidentally, Roger Cukierman, President of the CRIF, the umbrella organization of French Jewish communal groups, was quoted in Ha-aretz as praising the strong finish of National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in the first round of France’s April 2002 presidential elections, which would be “a sign to the Muslims to stay quiet.” (He later claimed he was misquoted.) See http://www.jewishsf.com/bk020503/ip14a.shtml.
19. Correspondence with Professor Yossi Shain, Georgetown University and Tel Aviv University.
20. The Conference was first established in response to an Eisenhower administration request to streamline Jewish lobbying.
25. “There are only two groups that are beating the drums for war in The Middle East—the Israeli Defense Ministry and its amen corner in the United States.”—“McLaughlin Group,” 8/26/90. Since those comments, Buchanan’s expressions of his anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish sentiments have become even more frequent, strident and shameless. Consider this post-9/11 statement: “Moreover, Bush cannot force Sharon to give up occupied land, for he cannot threaten Sharon with a cut-off in aid. Should he try, he will call down the rage of Congress and the wrath of the Israeli lobby and its Amen Corner.”—“Middle east peace an illusion?” November 21, 1991 at http://www.townhall.com/columnists/patBuchanan/printb20011121.shtml.


27. Ibid.


29. This trend was strengthened during the recent and financially record-breaking “emergency campaigns” on Israel’s behalf, a large part of which went to support Israeli victims of terror. Several Jewish American organizations chose to focus on large donors, sometimes to the exclusion of smaller donors, with all this entails for the breadth of those organizations’ demographic base of support and for the opportunities for access and policy influence afforded the large majority of American Jews who are not multimillionaires. Money talks.


32. See Pat Buchanan’s cover story—“Whose War? A neoconservative clique seeks to ensnare our country in a series of wars that are not in America’s interest.” March 24, 2003. The American Conservative. The title of Buchanan’s magazine suggests that only his “conservatism” is truly “American.”

33. This is particularly of interest given that the formative intellectual experience of a good number of the first generation of neoconservatives—including the godfather of neoconservatism, Irving Kristol—was the ideologically heated debates they participated in as 1930s New York socialists. Insofar as we know, the only intra-neoconservative debate concerning the bona fides of a “neoconservative” is Norman Podhoretz’s controversial attempt to enlist George Orwell posthumously as an ally, “If Orwell Were Alive Today,” 1984, Commentary.

34. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr.: America’s Constitutional Soul, p.80.


36. It is telling that not one of the 41 essays Kristol saw worthy of collection from the 46 or 47 year period Neoconservatism comprises not one is devoted to the subject of Israel.

37. America’s Constitutional Soul, pp. 80-81.

38. Perhaps the one first generation neoconservative whose work Mansfield’s description captures least well, despite what we noted above of his thematic definition of neoconservatism, is Irving Kristol: for when one reads Kristol’s political writings they disclose an understanding that is far more conducive to principled articulation than his self-account would lead one to believe: his avowedly personal account works far better as an impersonal account of his fellow first generation neoconservatives than it does of his own work. That the notoriously contrarian Kristol be perhaps the only contemporary commentator on political affairs who is more principled in practice than theory is somehow appropriate.

39. To be more precise, neoconservatism before it was dubbed as such by Michael Harrington in 1969? was more concerned with domestic policy than foreign policy. One should not forget that the journal that may be said to have launched, in fact if not in name, neoconservatism—The Public Interest—excluded foreign policy from its pages, partly because it seemed less interesting and less amenable to social science and partly because, as Irving Kristol wrote in “The Neocervative Persuasion,” there is no neoconservative consensus on foreign policy.

40. Some empirical evidence: in 2003 a Google search of the terms “neoconservatives” and “Iraq” yielded over 137,000 hits; a search of “neoconservatives” and “stem cells” brings up 1,030 matches. (A search of “conservatives” and “stem cells” resulted in 50,000 matches.)


43. Among second generation neoconservatives, one could list such individuals as Gary Schmitt, Nicholas and Mary Eberstadt, Tod Lindberg, George Weigel Frank Gaffney, Jim Woolsey, Frank Fukuyama, Michael Cromartie, Chris Caldwell, and James Ceaser.

44. Max Boot and David Frum are two prominent examples.
45. Steven J. Menashi in an excellent review of Podhoretz’s recent book The Prophets notes “the contentious status of the Hebrew prophets within the higher ranks of intellectual neoconservatism. ‘It is interesting that the Jewish prophets never much interested me,’ Irving Kristol wrote. Podhoretz, as if by rejoinder, argues in the introduction to The Prophets that ‘the worst thing of all that has been done to the prophets has not been to caricature or misrepresent but to ignore them.’ The Kristol-Podhoretz split over the relevance of the prophets parallels their two different intellectual styles. For Kristol neoconservatism has nothing especially to do with his Judaism or Jewish identity (rumblings from the fever swamps and The American Conservative notwithstanding).” The Claremont Review of Books, Fall 2003. http://www.claremont.org/writings/crb/fall2003/menashi.html. And Podhoretz’s prophetic Judaism is, to repeat, a distinctly minority voice in contemporary neoconservatism.


47. See http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/003/000tzmlw.asp.

48. Interview with the authors, November 17, 2003.


51. The voices the Administration were listening to at the time were certainly not those of neoconservatives. The Weekly Standard ran an editorial severely taking the Administration to task for as it were rewarding terrorists for September 11.


55. See http://usembassy.state.gov/mumbai/wwwwashnews335.html.


59. For a characteristic example, see the wildly inaccurate account of Strauss, the Straussians and neoconservatism in the leading German magazine Der Spiegel, which was printed in translation in the New York Times on August 4, 2003. http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/04/international/europe/04SPIEGEL.html?ex=1063339200&en=d02fc2e01a6ea50&ei=5070. A high point of the article is the misidentification of Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. as a “Jewish” student of Strauss’s.

60. See http://observer.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,4616570-102273,00.html.

61. The Public Interest, Fall 2003.

62. It shouldn’t be forgotten that among high office holders in America perhaps the three most forthright defenders of Israel were non-Jews: Henry “Scoop” Jackson, Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Jeane Kirkpatrick.
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