
PLATO AND
THE TALMUD



Jacob Howland

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This innovative study sees the relationship between Athens and Jerusalem through the lens of the Platonic dialogues and the Talmud. Jacob Howland argues that these texts are animated by comparable conceptions of the proper roles of inquiry and reasoned debate in religious life, and by a profound awareness of the limits of our understanding of things divine. Insightful readings of Plato's *Apology*, *Euthyphro*, and Chapter 3 of tractate Ta'anit explore the relationship of prophets and philosophers, fathers and sons, and gods and men (among other themes), bringing to light the tension between rational inquiry and faith that is essential to the speeches and deeds of both Socrates and the Talmudic sages. In reflecting on the pedagogy of these texts, Howland shows in detail how Talmudic aggadah and Platonic drama and narrative speak to different sorts of readers in seeking mimetically to convey the living ethos of rabbinic Judaism and Socratic philosophizing.

Jacob Howland is McFarlin Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tulsa. He is the author of *Kierkegaard and Socrates: A Study in Philosophy and Faith* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), *The Paradox of Political Philosophy: Socrates' Philosophic Trial* (1998), and *The Republic: The Odyssey of Philosophy* (1993). He also edited *A Long Way Home: The Story of a Jewish Youth, 1939–1949*, by Bob Golan (2005), and has published numerous articles.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521193139

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First published in print format 2010

ISBN-13 978-0-521-19313-9 Hardback

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For Irv and Sharna Frank, of blessed memory

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Acknowledgments

I owe a great debt to Rabbi Marc Boone Fitzerman of Congregation B'nai Emunah in Tulsa, Oklahoma, who introduced me to the Talmud. For more than a decade, Rabbi Fitzerman has graciously presided over a weekly Talmud study group in which I have been privileged to participate. It was by reading the Talmud that I became familiar with the paths of thought and action opened up by rabbinic Judaism, and so began to grasp the true fullness of Jewish intellectual and spiritual life. I am also thankful for the lasting friendships I have formed with my past and present study partners, including Jim Bednar, Morris Bernstein, Harvey Blumenthal, Curtis Green, Jan Jankowsky, Vernon Mudd, Howard Raskin, Coleman Robison, Fred Strauss, Brian Watt, Stephen Zeligson, and – of blessed memory – Irvin Frank, Nathan Loshak, Morris Mizel, Allen Zeff, and Robert Zeligson.

During a visit to Tulsa some years ago, Jacob Neusner encouraged me to write a book about the similarities between the Platonic dialogues and the Talmud. Later, Irving Greenberg did the same. I thank these men, both leaders in the world of Jewish thought, for motivating me to pursue this project. Rabbi Greenberg also helped me to obtain financial support for my work. I am grateful to the Littauer Foundation, the Earhart Foundation, Irvin Frank, and the University of Tulsa for making possible a yearlong sabbatic leave in 2008–09, during which this book was written.

In 2009, Yoram Hazony, provost of the Shalem Center, kindly invited me to speak on Plato and the Talmud. My visit to Jerusalem

proved to be enormously fruitful. I am indebted to the seminar participants, and in particular to Yoram, Ran Baratz, Meirav Jones, Yosef Yitzhak Lifshitz, Moshe Shoshan, Joshua Weinstein, and Michael Widlanski, for their many helpful criticisms and comments. Rabbi Lifshitz and Ronna Burger of Tulane University generously read and critiqued the manuscript; I am deeply grateful to both for the thoughtfulness and erudition they brought to this task.

Abraham Howland, with whom it is a special pleasure for me to discuss philosophy, read an early version of the first chapters of this book and made several helpful suggestions. As always, my wife, Jennifer Hayes Howland, made our home a wonderful place to read, think, and write. Beatrice Rehl, my editor at Cambridge University Press, saw the promise of this project early on, and supervised the acquisition and publication of this book with characteristic professionalism and efficiency. I thank my friends and colleagues Russ Hittinger, Jane Ackerman, Stephen Gardner, Michael Futch, and Matthew Drever for their scholarly assistance and intellectual companionship. I am indebted to another friend, Paul Rahe of Hillsdale College, for connecting me with the Shalem Center. I am grateful to Anne-Marie Bowery of Baylor University and David Roochnik of Boston University for inviting me to speak to their colleagues and students about Plato and the Talmud. I also wish to acknowledge the steady support of Tom Benediktson, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Tulsa, and of the Chapman Trusts, which finance my research and teaching as McFarlin Professor of Philosophy.

There are certain debts that no words can repay. As I was preparing these acknowledgments, news came of the death of Paul L. Brown, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tulsa. Paul gave me an academic job at a time when I despaired of getting one, and never ceased to mentor me. He had many friends; paradoxically, our knowledge of the extraordinary fullness and goodness of his life both softens and deepens the pain we feel in his absence.

Finally, I am eternally grateful for the friendship and generosity of Irv and Sharna Frank. The Franks' home was a kind of salon – a place of fellowship and good conversation, where one could feel the pulse of Tulsa and sense the peculiar excitement and entrepreneurial energy of Jewish life in Oklahoma. The Franks exemplified

philanthropic optimism and humility; they neglected no opportunity to help mend the world. This book is dedicated to their memory.

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Introduction

Athens and Jerusalem

What has Plato to do with the Talmud? The question is more than fair. The Platonic dialogues and the Talmud are separated in time by a millennium, and in spirit by the immeasurable gulf between the orienting concepts of the world that is by nature and the Word that is revealed by God. Plato's dialogues are philosophical dramas centered on the speeches and deeds of Socrates, while the Talmud comprises a detailed yet economically constructed law code (the Mishnah) coupled with an expansive and remarkably free-wheeling commentary (the Gemara). Socratic philosophizing consists in the critical examination of human opinions before the bar of reason; Talmudic inquiry measures itself by the comprehensive revelation of God in the Torah.¹ In origin, orientation, style, and substance, Platonic and Talmudic

¹ In the strict sense, the term "Torah" refers to the Five Books of Moses or Pentateuch. In an expanded sense, it refers to the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures, also known as the Tanakh, an acronym for *Torah*, *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings). In the broadest sense, Torah includes the Talmud and other rabbinic legal and ethical writings and interpretations of Scripture.

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Scripture and citations of the Hebrew text are drawn from the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, which incorporates the new JPS translation of 1985. The Talmud will be cited parenthetically in the text. Quotations from the Babylonian Talmud (BT) indicate the translation used; quotations from the Jerusalem Talmud (JT) are drawn from Neusner's *The Talmud of the Land of Israel*. Except where noted, translations of Greek texts are my own. Plato's dialogues and letters are cited parenthetically in the text by standard (Stephanus) line number, following *Platonis Opera* 1979–82.

writing would seem to be worlds apart. Must not the fruits with which these texts reward their readers be equally disparate?

One might reply that Athens and Jerusalem are united by a shared devotion to the acquisition of wisdom. But because this devotion springs from fundamentally different experiences, Judaism and Greek philosophy embrace distinct conceptions of what wisdom is and how it can be achieved. In the view of Leo Strauss, these conceptions are radically incompatible. “According to the Bible,” Strauss observes, “the beginning of wisdom [*hakhmah*] is fear of the Lord; according to the Greek philosophers, the beginning of wisdom [*sophia*] is wonder.”² The “one thing needful according to Greek philosophy” is thus “the life of autonomous understanding,” while “the one thing needful as spoken by the Bible is the life of obedient love.”³

Strauss notes that the Jewish life of obedient love takes its bearings by the recollection of the “absolute sacredness of a particular or contingent event” – the historical moment when God entered into a covenantal relationship at Sinai with a group of former slaves wandering in the wilderness, and thus constituted the people Israel (117).⁴ The covenant that God presents to the Jews as a divine command is for Him a free act of self-limitation (114–15) – an act in which the omnipotent and therefore intrinsically mysterious God establishes Himself as “incomprehensible and yet not unknown.”⁵ Because He is omnipotent, knowledge of God, as well as knowledge of the natural and moral order of the world, is rooted “in trust, or faith, which is radically different from theoretical certainty.” While theoretical certainty seems to follow from speeches or what speeches reveal, trust is evoked by deeds:

The biblical God is known in a humanly relevant sense only by His actions, by His revelations. The book, the Bible, is the account of what God has done and what He has promised. In the Bible, as we would say, men tell about God’s actions and promises on the basis of their experience of God. This

² Strauss 1997c, 379–80. Strauss here contrasts Proverbs 1:7 with Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 982b11–13.

³ Strauss 1997a (henceforth cited parenthetically in the text), 104.

⁴ Cf. Bernard Levinson’s commentary in Walzer, Lorberbaum, and Zohar 2000, 23–27.

⁵ Strauss 1997b, 306. For Strauss, the mystery of God is summarized in the Name of God recorded at Exodus 3:14, *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* – “I shall be What I shall be” (Strauss 1997c, 393).

experience, and not reasoning based on sense perception, is the root of biblical wisdom. (119)

In the Jewish tradition, Strauss summarizes, “there is no beginning made by an individual, no beginning made by man” (120).⁶

The life of autonomous understanding, by contrast, is an intellectual quest “for the beginnings, the first things” that is guided by the idea of nature, understood as an intelligible, unchanging, and only partially hidden “impersonal necessity” that is “higher than any personal being” (110–11).⁷ As the fundamental order or structure of what is – a domain that ranges from individually existing beings to the ultimate reality or wholeness of the Whole – riddling nature (*phusis*, the root of our word “physics”) arouses a love of wisdom (*philosophia*), the pursuit of which is both fearless and hopeless in comparison to the sacred awe of the Jews (109). While the rabbis relate that the Hebrews accepted God’s Torah (literally, “teaching” or “instruction”) even before they knew its content,⁸ Plato’s word for philosophical desire is *erōs*, the Greek term for the intrinsically clever and resourceful passion of sexual attraction.⁹ What is more, philosophy aspires ultimately to learn what is good, something the Jews claim to have been revealed to their forefathers by God.¹⁰ The alternative of Greek philosophy and Jewish faith is thus one of essentially

⁶ Strauss relates this point to the “favored form of writing” in the Jewish tradition, the commentary (120).

⁷ Plato (*Republic* 474c–80a) characterizes philosophy as a passionate striving to attain knowledge of the stable, self-subsistent beings referred to in the dialogues as *ideai* or *eidē* (Ideas or Forms).

⁸ For the various sources of this rabbinic legend, see Ginzberg 1910–38, 6.30–31 n. 181. Cf. Exodus Rabbah 27.9 in Midrash Rabbah (a major collection of rabbinical interpretations of Torah, henceforth MR), 3.329: “[W]hen God revealed Himself on Sinai, there was not a nation at whose doors He did not knock, but they would not undertake to keep it; as soon as He came to Israel, they exclaimed: *All that the Lord hath spoken we will do, and obey* (Ex. XXIV, 7).”

⁹ Plato, *Symposium* 203d.

¹⁰ Lachterman (1994, 6–7) notes that, while Plato identifies “the Good” – the unifying and ordering principle of the Ideas – as the highest and most difficult object of philosophical inquiry (*Republic* 504d–11e), the Torah declares, “He [the LORD] has told you, O man, what is good” (Micah 6:8; “the LORD” is the JPS rendering of “YHWH” or “Yahweh” [יהוה] as opposed to “the Lord,” which renders “Adonai”). Cf. Kallen 1918, 10–11: “for the Jews . . . *the fear of the Lord* . . . is the beginning of wisdom, while for the Greeks it is the *love of the Good* which is the beginning of wisdom” (emphases in original).

individual “progress” or essentially communal “return”: while wisdom is the philosopher’s distant aim, for the Jews it consists in faithfully remembering and practicing what God has already taught the community in the plain language of the Torah.¹¹

Strauss’s concern with the conflict between “the biblical and the philosophic notions of the good life” arises from his intuition that it is nothing less than “the secret of the vitality of Western civilization” (116). This conflict cannot be resolved, because divine omnipotence is “absolutely incompatible with Greek philosophy in any form” (110). This is not to say that there are not significant points of agreement between Greek philosophy and the Hebrew Bible. They agree about the importance and content of morality, and they agree that justice consists in submission to a divine law – although each solves the “problem” of divine law “in a diametrically opposed manner” (105–07). Such concinnities help to explain the “attempt to harmonize, or to synthesize, the Bible and Greek philosophy” that has, at least “at first glance,” characterized “the whole history of the West.” But this attempt is in Strauss’s view “doomed to failure”:

The harmonizations and synthesizations are possible because Greek philosophy can *use* obedient love in a subservient function, and the Bible can *use* philosophy as a handmaid; but what is used in each case rebels against such use, and therefore the conflict is really a radical one. (104, emphases in original)

Does Strauss’s analysis of the relationship between Greek philosophy and the Bible leave room for, much less invite, a meaningful comparison between Plato and the Talmud? To begin with, Strauss rightly frames the problem of the relationship between what he calls “Athens” and “Jerusalem” in terms of competing ways of life. What is at issue is not simply what one knows, but how one *lives*; wisdom – whether it is conceived as *hakhmah* or as *sophia* – is in each case understood to be primarily and essentially manifested in a certain form of human existence. Strauss also correctly emphasizes the significance

¹¹ While philosophy as a discipline might be said to progress (cf. 94–95), such progress is nevertheless entirely dependent on individual achievement. Thus, although wisdom can in principle be shared by everyone, Plato’s depiction of the consummation of the philosophic quest as the ultimate satisfaction of erotic longing (*Republic* 490a–b) underscores the personal or private nature of this quest.

of morality and law in both traditions. But while he acknowledges the possible use of wonder and autonomous understanding in Judaism, and of obedience and humility in Greek philosophy, he does not discern the essential roles that these elements actually play in both traditions. These roles are particularly evident when one contemplates, not the Bible and Greek philosophy in general, but Plato and the Talmud in particular.

Consider the aforementioned problem of divine law. While rational analysis and reflection are essential features of inquiry and argument in the Talmud, it is less widely recognized that the quest for truth, “wherever and however it can be found,” is favorably represented in the Hebrew Bible as well.¹² But in the Jewish tradition, the quest for truth takes place within the horizon of a revealed Law (here capitalized to indicate its divine origins) that comprehensively orders human life and is passed down from generation to generation. Simply by inquiring into what is by nature, however, Greek philosophy implicitly calls into question the teachings of ancestral law, custom, or convention (*nomos*); not coincidentally, *nomos* is the term that renders the word “Torah” in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures prepared in Alexandria during the third through the first centuries BCE.¹³ Yet this difference should not be allowed to obscure a deeper similarity. For it is nature or *phusis* that is for the philosophers, as the Torah is for the Jews, the ultimate beginning and measure of thought and action, and it enjoys this status precisely because it presents itself as “given” independently of human activity.¹⁴ Put another way, philosophy uncovers or discovers the order of nature,

¹² Hazony 2008, 278. Hazony provides ample evidence for his conclusion that “the biblical God is portrayed as revealing his truths and unleashing his deeds in response to man’s search for truth. He even longs for man’s questioning and seeking” (281).

¹³ Ginzberg (1928, 65) deplores “the inaccurate rendering of the Hebrew word ‘Torah’ by ‘law,’” a term that fails to convey that Torah is “an expression for the aggregate of Jewish teachings ... compris[ing] every field and mark of culture.” “Law” certainly gives no sense of the Torah’s role as the animating principle of the whole world of traditional Jewish life. Even *nomos* is too narrow a term, because it is inevitably understood, thanks to Greek philosophy, as a human construction that must be distinguished from nature or *phusis* – a distinction that is entirely foreign to the Jewish conception of Torah.

¹⁴ In Plato’s formulation, philosophy is distinct from poetry in that it is an art of acquisition (specifically, the acquisition of knowledge) rather than one of fabrication

but does not produce it; in subordinating itself to nature, philosophy is no more autonomous, in the literal meaning of “self-legislating,” than thought that begins from the Torah. Nor is this subordination merely theoretical, because the philosophers’ understanding of *phusis* directs their deeds just insofar as it guides their thought.

Of course, nature does not address human beings, much less legislate for a human community; where God speaks, nature is silent. But for the Greek philosophers, the order of nature includes the end or good at which things aim; because nature is teleological, it is also implicitly prescriptive.¹⁵ In particular, the philosophers find in the human inclination to learn and capacity for rational understanding a natural basis for the superiority of the philosophical life.¹⁶ This superiority, however, is not recognized in the laws or customs of any actually existing political community. Indeed, the Greeks’ widespread ignorance of the worth of philosophy is a common theme in philosophical writing.¹⁷ As the public trial and execution of Socrates at Athens in 399 BCE makes clear, the problem goes beyond ignorance. It is not coincidental that Socrates was convicted of impiety and corruption, for the religion of the Greeks militates against philosophy. Like the Hebrew Bible, the Greek poetic tradition – the primary vehicle for the formation and transmission of religious myth – teaches that human life is limned by intrinsically mysterious powers. But unlike the Bible, the myths of the poets do not recognize a God who creates

(*Sophist* 219a–c). Cf. Fisch 1997, 56, which compares the attitude of scientists toward natural phenomena to that of the rabbis toward the Torah.

¹⁵ Socrates’ quest for knowledge of the Good is motivated by his observation that, while what is good is that which “every soul pursues and for the sake of which it does everything,” the soul “is in perplexity about it, and unable to grasp sufficiently just what it is” (*Republic* 505d–e). Cf. the opening line of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*: “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and deliberate choice, seems to aim at some good; the good has therefore been well defined as that at which all things aim” (1094a1–3). In his *Physics*, Aristotle discerns teleology in all that grows by nature, including plants and animals.

¹⁶ Socrates’ judgment that “the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being” (Plato, *Apology* 38a) is, for the philosophers, the decisive consequence of the observation with which Aristotle begins his *Metaphysics*: “All human beings desire by nature to know” (980a21).

¹⁷ The pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes complains that, while the cities glorify victory in athletic competition, “it is not right to prefer physical strength to noble Wisdom” (Freeman 1977, 21 [frag. 2]); Adeimantus, Socrates’ companion (and Plato’s brother!), opines that philosophers are either “useless” or “vicious” (*Republic* 487b–d).

an ordered universe suited to human welfare, offers special instruction to human beings in the form of revelation, and rewards and punishes with justice tempered by mercy. The Greek tradition in effect acknowledges the “welter and waste” of which Scripture speaks (*tohu vabohu*, Genesis 1:2), but not the God whose breath or spirit hovers over these troubled waters.¹⁸ Because the philosophers see ordered nature where the poetic tradition sees chaos, there is, as Plato writes, “an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry” (*Republic* 607b). Aristotle accordingly begins his *Metaphysics* by explicitly disputing the belief, widely disseminated by the poets, that human excellence – in this case, in the acquisition of wisdom – is likely to arouse the jealousy of the gods (982b–83a).

The preceding reflections suggest an analogy between the self-understanding of the Greek philosophers and that of the Jews. The philosophers recognize no revealed teaching, but they have the guidance of *phusis*, and in their own view this sets them apart as the few from the many.¹⁹ While the point must not be pressed too far, one could say that nature is the (admittedly only partially articulated) Law of the Greek philosophers,²⁰ which in certain respects differs from all other, merely human laws, customs, and conventions (*nomoi*) no less than the way of the Jews as taught in the Torah differs from the ways of “the nations” (*hagoyim*).²¹

¹⁸ “Welter and waste” is the translation of Alter, *Genesis* 1996. According to Hesiod, everything – including Earth, Heaven, Day, Night, Eros, and all the gods – originally sprang from Chaos (*Theogony* 116; Hesiod 1914, 86–87). That the poets assume reality is fundamentally fluid and disordered is confirmed at Plato, *Theaetetus* 152d–e; cf. 160d, where Socrates links Homer with Heraclitus.

¹⁹ Consider Heraclitus’s characterization of the *logos*, the intrinsic governing order of the cosmos, of which “the many” are ignorant inasmuch as they “live as if they had understanding peculiar to themselves” (Freeman 1977, 24–25 [frag. 2]). In the *Republic*, Socrates explains that philosophers are in fact the few among the few; of the minority of human beings who have a nature suited to philosophy, only a small number remain uncorrupted by their relatives and fellow citizens (496a–b).

²⁰ The reverse is not true, however. Brague (2003) emphasizes that, for the Jews, “nature” – the stable order of the created world, which is the same for all human beings everywhere and at all times – is significant not in itself, but as the “framework for events situated in time” (49). Relative to its status for the Greek philosophers, nature is thus devalued in favor of “history,” specifically, the unfolding of God’s unique relationship to the people Israel.

²¹ In frag. 114, Heraclitus proclaims: “If we speak with intelligence [*xun nōi*], we [philosophers?] must base our strength on that which is common to all [*xunōi*],

Other affinities between “Athens” and “Jerusalem” on the subject of law come to light when one compares the Talmud’s attitude toward Greek thought to the pedagogical caution of the Platonic dialogues with respect to the role of philosophy in civic life. At first sight, the Talmud’s opinion of Greek intellectual endeavors seems unambiguous: “Cursed be a man who rears pigs and cursed be a man who teaches his son Greek wisdom!” the Gemara declares.²² But this turns out to be far from a blanket condemnation of Greek thinking. Setting aside the problem that we do not know what “Greek wisdom” (*ḥakhmat yevanit*) means in this context, neither here nor elsewhere does the Talmud explicitly forbid its study; it only prohibits teaching such wisdom to children.²³ The thirteenth-century scholar Israel of Toledo connects the quoted statement from tractate Sotah with Rabbi Eliezer’s injunction against allowing children to engage in “excessive reflection.”²⁴ If, as Rabbi Israel thinks, “excessive reflection” refers to the “science of logic,” or alternatively to “dialectics and sophistry,”²⁵ Eliezer’s prohibition bears comparison to Socrates’ assertion that no one under thirty years of age should be exposed to dialectical argumentation, lest he be “filled with lawlessness” (*Republic* 537e). Be that as it may, both Socrates and the rabbis make a sharp distinction between the formative education of the young that is achievable through good laws and those modes of thought – including techniques of critical analysis and argumentation – that only mature adults may safely pursue.²⁶ This distinction is underscored by yet

as the city on the law, and even more strongly. For all human laws [*nomoi*] are nourished by one, which is divine” (Freeman 1977, 32). Cf. the “Aleinu” prayer, a part of the daily liturgy in which Jews praise the Lord “Who has not made us as the nations of the lands [*shelo asanu k’goyey ha’aratzo!*]”

²² BT Sotah 49B (Soncino trans.), repeated at BT Bava Kamma 82B.

²³ Lieberman 1962, 100–03.

²⁴ BT Berakhot 28B (Neusner trans.).

²⁵ Lieberman 1962, 103.

²⁶ Note that the Mishnah also includes a prohibition, promulgated at the time of the Jewish revolt of 66–73 CE, against a man’s “teach[ing] Greek to his son” (Sotah 9:14; all translations from the Mishnah are drawn from Neusner’s *The Mishnah*). On the role of Jewish law in shaping habits, emotions, and desires, and in training the body as well as the mind, see Berkovits 2002, 3–39 (“Law and Morality in Jewish Tradition”) and 41–87 (“The Nature and Function of Jewish Law”). Berkovits errs, however, in characterizing the “Socratic-Platonic” position as the view that goodness is simply a kind of knowledge, and that “reason itself . . . [can] cause man to act ethically” (10, 15). The first and most important part of the education of citizens in the *Republic*’s city in speech, for example, consists in training body and soul so as

another Talmudic passage concerning Greek wisdom. Asked whether one who has “studied the entire Torah” may study *ḥakhmat yevanit*, Rabbi Ishmael quotes Joshua 1:8: “This book of the Torah shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night.” “So go, find a time that is neither day nor night,” Ishmael instructs the questioner, “and that is when you may study the wisdom of Greece” (BT *Menaḥot* 99B, Neusner trans.). Ishmael does not explicitly forbid the study of Greek wisdom, but merely restricts it to a time that looks, at first, like no time at all. Strikingly, the Athenian Stranger of Plato’s *Laws* concurs: in the best regime, a regime rooted in the educative power of good laws, philosophical discussion (particularly about the existence and nature of the gods) will take place among a select group of actual and potential civic leaders meeting in private only during the twilight between dawn and sunrise (951d) – a time that is precisely “neither day nor night.”

I am not suggesting that the rabbis read the *Laws*. Neither Plato nor Socrates is mentioned by name in rabbinic literature.²⁷ Greek and Latin philosophical terms are furthermore conspicuously absent from the rabbinic writings, even though the rabbis were evidently acquainted with Hellenistic literature, knowledgeable about philosophical discussions, and in some cases interested in philosophical questions.²⁸ This absence is presumably explained by the rabbis’ informed judgment that philosophy was foreign to their basic concerns.²⁹ In particular, they seem to have distinguished between the active life of morality and service to God that they embraced as Jews and the life of contemplation that they took to be the philosophical ideal.³⁰

to produce settled dispositions that are simultaneously moderate and courageous. This is achieved not by an appeal to reason, but by using the arts of music and gymnastic to shape the emotions and desires of the young, and to arouse in them a love of order and beauty – a process that Socrates compares to taming animals, tuning instruments, molding putty, and dyeing wool (see 374d–417b with 429e–30b, and cf. Howland 2004a, 96–104). A similar procedure is followed in the regime laid out in Plato’s *Laws*, in which the Athenian Stranger asserts that law must look toward the whole of virtue (705d–e).

²⁷ Harvey 1992, 88. Lieberman (1963, 135) asserts that the rabbis “probably did not read Plato.”

²⁸ See Lieberman 1962 and 1963 with Harvey 1992.

²⁹ Harvey 1992, 101; cf. Lieberman 1963, 135.

³⁰ See the story told at *Exodus Rabbah* 13:1 about the encounter between the philosopher Oenomaus of Gadara and the rabbis (MR 150–51), with the analysis of Harvey 1992, 94–95.

Within the context of Greek thinking, however, Socrates is something unexpected: a philosopher for whom the *vita contemplativa* is inseparable from the *vita activa*, and whose intellectual pride is tempered by religious humility.³¹ Plato's *Apology of Socrates* depicts the defense speech the philosopher offers at his public trial on the charges of impiety and corrupting the young. Socrates claims in the *Apology* that he began to engage in his distinctive philosophical activity – the process of questioning his fellow citizens and, inevitably, exposing the incoherence of their opinions – in order to test the oracle of the god at Delphi, which had declared that no one was wiser than he. Socrates explains that he came to understand the oracle to mean that he is wiser than others just to the extent that he recognizes his own ignorance. By examining and refuting his fellow Athenians, he shows that human wisdom is “worth little or nothing” (23a–b). In this way, he simultaneously serves the Athenians and the Delphic deity: Socrates humbles others in argument in order that they may come to share his knowledge of ignorance and his humility in relation to the wisdom of “the god,” and so turn in earnest to the quest for truth and the care of their souls (cf. 29d–30a). Nor is the *Apology* the only dialogue in which Plato exposes the religious depths beneath the bright logical surfaces of Socratic philosophizing. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates maintains that he serves “the god” as a philosophical midwife (149a–151d). In the *Symposium*, he presents the philosophical achievement of wisdom as the culmination of an initiation into the quasi-religious mysteries of *erōs* (207a–212a). In the *Republic*, he characterizes as a kind of prophecy the soul's access to the intrinsic goodness and wholeness of what is (505e–506a). And in various dialogues, Socrates speaks of the divine being (*daimonion*) that directs his philosophical activity.³² The overall picture of Socratic philosophizing that emerges from these dialogues is one in which the love of wisdom that springs from wonder is moderated by a sense of awe before, and responsibility to, that which presents itself as divine.

³¹ Unless the context indicates otherwise, all references to “Socrates” are to the character who goes by this name in Plato's dialogues.

³² *Apology* 31d, 40a; *Euthydemus* 272e; *Republic* 496c; *Theaetetus* 151a; *Phaedrus* 242b–c; *Alcibiades I* 103a; *Theages* 128d–131a. *Daimonion* is a diminutive of *daimōn*, a term used of a range of divine powers or beings.

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