

Samuel Lebens, *The Principles of Judaism*. Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. xiii + 331pp. \$100 (hbk).

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Samuel Lebens is a major player in an ever-growing movement to explore Judaism through the methods and literature of analytic philosophy. (He is co-founder of The Association for the Philosophy of Judaism, whose website is perhaps the main organ of this movement.) Approaching Jewish philosophy in the analytic mode transforms it from the historical field it had long been – where *assessment* of arguments and positions was simply not the primary aim – and fashions it via the methods and objectives customarily found in contemporary analytic Christian philosophy. Lebens fuses in this volume his immense talent in analytic philosophy with broad and deep erudition in Jewish texts (obvious from his index of classical Jewish sources, 326-31), along with helpings of psychology, medicine, cosmology, and literature. With these varied tools, Lebens explicates three fundamental principles of Judaism (here slightly shortened): (1) the universe is the creation of one God; (2) the Torah is a divine system of laws and wisdom revealed by the creator; (3) the creator exercises providential care over creation, manifest in continued sustenance of the world, reward and punishment, and the promise of ultimate salvation (3).

These principles, inspired by Joseph Albo (1380-1444), represent a “minimalist axiomatization” of Judaism (vii). They are not put forth as a “legally binding catechism” (3) and there may be other axiomatizations (vii). Lebens is an Orthodox Jew, however, and he makes clear that he is axiomatizing specifically Orthodox Judaism (1). While faith in the three principles is sufficient for being Orthodox, Lebens does not maintain that the three principles must be *interpreted* (“given flesh”) exactly as he proposes. Still, he believes that he provides “the most plausible interpretation” of the principles (275).

Since Lebens is starting from an Orthodox position, he is not trying to capture, as a biblical scholar or scholar of Jewish Studies would, what an ancient human author might have intended by the Bible’s words, but rather what *God* might have intended to convey, “given what we know today” (4). What we now know about, for example, ethics or science affects, on Lebens’ view, what we take God to have meant way back when. Lebens does not try to prove the three principles; after all, he is trying to systematize Orthodoxy and find the best interpretation, so its principles can legitimately be his starting point (4, 6). (Actually, he does not desist completely from establishing the principles by neutral argumentation.) Finally, he is clear that Christianity and Islam will endorse belief in creation, revelation, and redemption, but diverge in ways that distinguish them from Judaism (198-205).

Lebens drives full-throttle, and it’s a great ride: an exciting, ever percolating series of highly imaginative (and not infrequently brilliant) critical and constructive arguments, studded with enjoyable examples and counterexamples and penetrating exegeses of Jewish texts, with something significant happening on every page. The book is remarkably rich. Despite the large

expanse covered and the sheer number of points, some of which are perforce hit-and-run, the work is cohesive and, for anyone who follows its packed pages and their twists and turns, provides a wonderful workout. Be prepared to park your intuitions, however. The major surprise for those not familiar with Lebens' prior work and that of his analytic associates Tyron Goldschmidt (with whom Lebens developed some of the book material), Jerome Yehuda Gellman, and Aaron Segal, is Lebens' heavy utilization of Hasidic Kabbalistic metaphysics. He embraces the "Extreme Hasidic Idealism" (EHI) that he finds in the thought of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760), founder of Hasidism, and Rabbi Shnayer Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812), author of the seminal and celebrated work *Tanya*, according to which the universe is an idea (or set of ideas) in the mind of God—an idea that He created *ex nihilo*. That's Lebens' reading of principle 1, creation. What is significant here (and in later parts of the book) is not just that analytic philosophy is used to analyze Judaism, nor just that medieval Jewish philosophy interacts extensively with analytic philosophy (31-69), but also that ancient rabbinic works (Talmud and Midrash) and mystical/Kabbalistic texts are brought to bear on the agenda of analytic philosophers. The growing affinity of contemporary Jewish philosophers for Hasidism, a movement that began in the eighteenth century, matches, perhaps coincidentally, the growing popularity of Hasidism in general Orthodox society, though that attraction often is to the fervent emotional side of Hasidism.

There's plenty else to talk about, though.

Lebens opens with a discussion of apophatic theology, responding to Alvin Plantinga's and Peter van Inwagen's opposition. The focus in the introduction is a problem of self-contradiction: apophatic theology says that God is indescribable, but doesn't that describe Him? The propositional contradictions are mirrored in people who have both cataphatic and apophatic experiences. Drawing on interpretations of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, Lebens suggests that the contradictions in apophaticism can be approached either as "illuminating falsehoods" or as "therapeutic falsehoods" (or, still better, both). His ultimate claim in that section (17-28) is that the contradictions generated by apophaticism signal our inability to attain truth in theology. All we can attain is, in Karl Popper's terminology, verisimilitude (24-28). Shining these lights on himself, Lebens goes on to say that the theology he presents is incomplete and fallible.

For my part, I take the contradictions of apophaticism to refute the approach, and Lebens doesn't think otherwise; he is taking the contradictions to encapsulate, symbolize, and remind us of truths about our limitations. But given the seemingly endless disputes about, for example, which attributes flow from perfection and how to resolve contradictions like foreknowledge versus free will, we probably don't need apophaticism to learn the lesson about humility that Lebens rightly deems beneficial. And learning it from a self-contradictory theory is not optimal. Additionally, the notion of an apophatic and cataphatic "experience" needs sharpening, particularly since apophatic *experience* is supposed to be different from the *belief* that God is indescribable.

It is good to keep in mind, too, that acknowledging limitations of theology may breed not only humility but indolence—a point Lebens himself lightly touches on in a different context (cf. 102-105). If theology has to be incomplete, if we confront contradictions, and our best hope is verisimilitude, why bother working hard at it? Not much of a question, you'll say: history and science are incomplete, but we don't worry about despair and indolence on the part of their practitioners. And verisimilitude is no small achievement. But these other fields are not riddled with puzzles, paradoxes, contradictions, and pervasive systematic disagreement in the way philosophy is; and in philosophy we must confront the celebrated question of whether there is progress, because the march to verisimilitude is often pushed back, the course

reversed. The risk of rationalizable indolence (more precisely, despair) is greatest with apophaticism, a false theory, though it can arise without it.

Chapters 2-5 are devoted to creation. Lebens argues that overall, if we take into account philosophical, cosmological, and biblical-traditional considerations, creation *ex nihilo* emerges as the most plausible view. It beats out Hasdai Crescas' "eternal creation" view and Levi Gersonides' theory of creation from eternal formless matter. (Because the latter is Plato's view and the pun works, I like to call it the "play-dough" theory.) But then comes the twist: several attributes ascribed to God in classical theism – omnipotence, perfect rationality, and the triadic goodness-knowledge-rationality – each lead to the conclusion that EHI (again, Extreme Hasidic Idealism) is true. EHI goes beyond Berkeleyan idealism and beyond "Moderate Hasidic Idealism." In EHI, one mind exists – God – and nothing else. As Lebens formulates and develops this sort of idealism, "we" (the scare quotes are mine) are characters in a story "written" by God, who is the "perfect storyteller" (102-105). Alternatively, the world that we (whatever that means) think we live in is in truth something akin to a divine dream.

God creates the story *ex nihilo*. But even *in* the story, the world was created *ex nihilo* (in a different way). More important: *In the story*, in God's imagination, we exist, are sentient, suffer, and have free will. Outside the story, we don't even exist. Hamlet was prince of Denmark, but only inside the story.

The theodic payoff of this view is enormous (98-102). No one suffers, no one dies, no one murders millions. The being who is generating the story may be *thought* to be cruel just by virtue of having cooked up such scenarios. But Lebens rejects this rejoinder (100-101). It's hard to make peace with the fictionality of suffering that characterizes the EHI perspective. But *in the story* there *is* suffering, *in the story* there is an imperative for humans to care deeply about evil and to remove it, and *in the story* we want a theodicy, a way to understand God. (On occasion, even the master storyteller, God, may need to insert contradictions in the story. [102-105, 142].)

Here's where we are: EHI *follows from* classical theism in three different ways. Ergo, if you accept classical theism (even *one* of the attributes referenced in the pro-EHI arguments), you must accept EHI!

Fittingly, Lebens cites David Lewis' quip that he can defend himself against every objection to his modal realism except one: the "incredulous stare" (105). Even by the standards of revisionary metaphysics, EHI (and the claim it follows from classical theism!) appears weird, wild, and wacky. But if weirdness, wildness, and wackiness were a decisive consideration, we may as well kill off much else in revisionary metaphysics, and, for good measure, quantum physics. Further, Lebens is a master at rebutting objections to his theories (and devising some of his own). He thinks lots of things make sense on his view, just as lots of things make sense on Lewis'. Of course, according to EHI, Lebens' discussion in the book is *itself* part of the story. For that matter, so is the activity of the rabbis who devised EHI; they too exist only in God's mind. Lebens' response would be: So what? That's not a *criticism* of my view, that *is* my view.

Even with that said, it's hard to wrap one's head around this putatively "most plausible" interpretation of creation, let alone believe it. Barring the failure of all three arguments Lebens advances for EHI,¹ we have here a classic confrontation between philosophical arguments that seem cogent (*ex hypothesi*) and commonsense – a clash that calls to mind Zeno and has been debated in contemporary philosophy. How does a revisionary metaphysician view things

¹ For critique of EHI itself and the arguments for it, see Andrew Pessin's lively and laudatory review in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 88 (2020): 307-12.

in everyday life? At a Seder, does she translate in her mind “I’m eating matzah” to match her metaphysical views about composition and identity, or does she do a gestalt switch at the table and then switch back in her office? Does she just jettison the philosophy? Such quandaries arise for philosophers with great regularity, and lapsing into commonsense may be a kind of epistemic akrasia. Maybe that is how EHI advocates would respond to the weirdness. Remember, in a naturalist philosophical environment, theism itself is a kind of revisionary metaphysics. EHI only adds layers. So EHI could survive despite its wackiness, and it will need to be critiqued some other way by us characters if it will be rejected. (Most people don’t know about EHI, and for them there’s no conflict with commonsense. Their ignorance is bliss.)

Having lavished all this attention on EHI, Lebens sets the thesis aside. He explains that the discussion of principles 2 (revelation) and 3 (providence-reward and punishment-salvation) can hold up even if EHI is false. In Chapters 6 and 7, which address revelation, he takes on a tall order, a triple threat to Orthodox Judaism: biblical criticism; archaeological evidence against the veracity of biblical history; and ethical objections to biblical morality, which he regards as an aspect of the problem of evil. These are widely deemed the most powerful challenges to Orthodox Judaism’s principle of revelation. Regarding the first challenge, Lebens initially argues that the biblical critics beg the question – they *start* by assuming the Torah is the work of human hands in different times and different places. About the second, he essentially says that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, and that anyway the Bible is not meant as history (historical writing as a genre came later, he says). But about the third, Lebens follows Jerome Gellman and Tamar Ross in advocating for “progressive [or ongoing] revelation.” In Lebens’ version, the revelation at Sinai recorded in the Bible *was* a historical event. It can be established as such, he maintains, by “the *Kuzari* argument” – Judah Halevi’s (1075-1141) argument that belief in Sinaitic revelation is what Lebens calls a “national unforgettable.” The reports of the Sinaitic revelation must be true, goes the argument, because they were uncontested in the period after the event was said to happen and are part of national memory (189-98). He defends this argument against the criticism to which it has been commonly subjected: that *Kuzari* advocates do *not* deem cogent parallel arguments from other societies (such as the Mahayana tradition recorded in the Lotus Sutra). Lebens’ view (which parallels an epistemological method used elsewhere in the book) is that for someone *antecedently committed* to belief in a personal God, the *Kuzari* argument for Sinaitic revelation is “plausible at worst, compelling at best” (196). But having affirmed that the Sinaitic revelation occurred, Lebens argues – utilizing an array of rabbinic texts – that revelation continues through history. Changes in ethical sensibilities about (e.g.) equality, which conflict with ancient biblical sensibilities, can be embraced as part of revelation.

How so? The basic idea is that there’s a Heavenly Torah and an earthly Torah, and as history marches on, the Jewish people brings the Earthly Torah closer to the Heavenly Torah (which is conceived as a “pure abstractum”). What’s more, “God also endorsed at Sinai the process of evolving tradition and interpretation that the faithful of Israel would develop over time” (274). In other words, later developments come with a prior “divine stamp of approval” dating back to the revelation at Sinai. However, the endorsement is of a process, not particular positions (185). Lebens does not go so far as to say, as others have, that biblical criticism and archaeological finds (or non-finds) are part of an ongoing divine revelation. But in principle he might apply the theory this way if he thought the evidence were strong enough. Nevertheless, he argues (in contrast to thinkers like Benjamin Sommer) that the Pentateuch has to be treated as especially divine, if only because the process of revelation has highlighted it as such (180-85).

It's incontrovertible that post-biblical Judaism is a culture of interpretation and argumentation. And the activity of the Rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash is dubbed "Torah she-be-al Peh," the Oral Torah. (See 174.) So far, so good. But first of all, as Lebens concedes (188), sometimes, in the rabbis' view, God's ruling may differ from their own (Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Metz'ia* 59a-b), albeit Lebens is right to point out (in his rejoinder, 188) that Judaism also has the idea of *ruach ha-kodesh* (holy spirit) animating the overall process. Moreover, to speak of a continuing revelation, extending indefinitely and across a wide range of later societal beliefs and practices, poses certain difficulties. Presumably revelation is a supernatural event, and progressive or ongoing revelation is thus a series of supernatural interventions that produce certain results. Now, Lebens is convincing when he argues that there are no good non-question-begging arguments against supernatural explanations (223-29). But how many such events is it plausible to affirm, and are these particular supernatural explanations (ongoing revelations) plausible? Changed ethical ideals would have to be the result of God implanting ideas in people's minds or at least doing some nudging. But this sounds treacherously close to divine brainwashing. Apart from posing a threat to intellectual autonomy, it raises questions about how people could deserve credit for their intellectual output (even more so since God endowed humans with the potential). It's like crediting a faith-healer who correctly states facts about members of the audience when in truth an accomplice feeds information through an earpiece. If the results are, by contrast, explained naturalistically, as what humans came up with by their own devices, the word "revelation" seems inapt. (Caveat: determinists, who are found among Hasidic thinkers, will not be perturbed by the divine interventions.)

Lebens writes that the process of continuing revelation is "guided by *ruach hakodesh* (the holy spirit)," and the "overall trajectory" will be "that the unfolding content of the revelation, through the religiously observant communities of the Jewish people, brings the content of the Earthly Torah ever closer to the content of the Heavenly Torah" (274). But how the guidance of *ruach hakodesh* works needs clarification. The basic idea seems to be the familiar one that God ordains certain general outcomes, but at least some of those may be achieved through a variety of means. But even granting that, if there is a continuing revelation, then, as Lebens himself asks (175), how would one distinguish new developments that should be absorbed into Jewish law and thought and those that should be rejected? Must Jewish law embrace *everything* because it's part of the revelation? What about the fact that so many Jews today are secular, and that non-Orthodox denominations outnumber Orthodoxy? Is there something positive in that for the Orthodox, such that it would be part of a continuing revelation? We are to direct such questions to "the faithful" within "the religious communities of Israel," but who are they, how are they identified, and what are *their* grounds for differentiating welcome from unwelcome developments? Should someone who doesn't embrace certain developments automatically be regarded as not from the faithful of Israel? Lebens addresses some of these questions, implicitly or explicitly, but I sense that the metaphysical overlay of progressive revelation has generated problems of its own.

Chapter 8 addresses principle 3. After a crisp overview of Jewish eschatology, Lebens connects redemption with the problem of evil and with forgiveness. His basic idea is that in redemption God deletes evil from history. He erases the past, at least for those who repent. Sins are wiped away – sometimes being eliminated altogether, sometimes being transferred to another object by way of atonement (Lebens calls that "amputation"). God makes whatever other changes in the world the erasure or transfer necessitates. This doesn't explain why the

evil occurred in the first place, but it is an attractive, uplifting theory of what redemption would amount to.²

The metaphysical theory of time and hypertime is brilliantly worked out. But positing deletion in the hyper-literal sense Lebens favors is not well motivated by Jewish sources. Lebens quotes Rabbi Tzadok ha-Kohen (1823-1900) as supporting a literal deletion, but this hardly establishes a consensus. Further, Lebens' picture requires of God countless interventions; assuming that nobody is sinless, there'll at least one erasure for each person who ever lived and repented. It is ironic, therefore, that Lebens cites Maimonides' view of the messianic era. Maimonides' writings display a general naturalistic sensibility that minimizes direct divine interventions, including a firm declaration that there will be no miracles in the messianic age (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings 12:1). This sensibility is contravened over and over and over if we posit all these deletions of evil. The deletions narrative thus requires rejecting Maimonides on redemption, not a comfortable choice. As was the case with revelation, Lebens' scenario involves a great deal of direct divine activity. I'm trying only to call attention to an issue – that some important Jewish thinkers have religious sensibilities that cut against frequent supernatural interventions. And if God does the deleting only when a person has repented, He's not getting rid of all the evils anyway.

The last chapter (#9) is labelled "Conclusions," but that's a misnomer: it covers a wide *new* terrain in, as usual, creative and interesting ways. Indeed, the chapter shifts Lebens' focus from metaphysics to phenomenology, religious behavior, and Jewish values. Lebens stresses that a Jew should have *faith* in the three principles (or whatever alternative principles are used). Note well: faith is the operative word, not belief. Faith does not require belief, Lebens argues; not because faith is all about commitment, but because – this is a fascinating claim – a person can have faith while having doubts, but can't have doubts about something he believes (277-79). If he doubts, he doesn't believe. Descartes would seem to be a counterexample but that (I suggest) may be because Cartesian doubt was of a special sort (methodological).

Besides characterizing faith, the chapter seeks, as perhaps its key objective, to define religiosity. It does so in terms of holiness, which in turn Lebens connects to awe. Next comes a fascinating discussion of "make-belief" which is launched by a comment of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888). Make-belief is "trying to experience the world as a world in which God is your God" (289); it's a kind of "attentive seeing-as" (288). It is demanded of us, for "Our religious beliefs are not supposed to be in the background" (290). Sometimes, though, "Religiosity requires making-believe things that are false" (290-91). The chapter ends with an inspiring articulation of Jewish values and of character traits that are "essential to Jewish identity" (293-97). These values and traits constrain the principles of Judaism. Lebens proclaims that "the Jewish mission" is "tied up with promoting the welfare of all humankind" (296).

This discussion of values is somewhat rushed, and the formulation that an unkind person "couldn't truly be in the community of Israel" does not ring literally true. How the three principles relate to ethics and how ethics relates to who's in and who's out needs clarification. A fuller discussion of exclusion would also address the argument that, because belief has waned, there are multiple routes to Jewish identity – faith, conduct, consciousness of the Jewish past and future, identification with the Jewish State. Admittedly, the latter topic would take us far afield.

I close with three general comments.

² See also Pessin, 310.

First, there are places where I think Lebens deals too quickly with certain elements of Jewish tradition. One example: his strictures against professions of certainty (296) ostensibly invalidate the notion of *emunah shelemah* (complete faith) that runs through so much of Jewish literature, including the daily prayer book, and is the theme of perhaps the most powerful song in the Jewish consciousness (*ani ma'amin be-emunah shelemah*). Perhaps the faith-belief distinction would be invoked here, but the authors probably did not make that distinction.

A second issue is whether it is plausible that the correct explication of a principle would lie beyond the ken of the vast majority of believers. Granted, even a proposition so basic as *God exists* will not be understood by the average person in the way philosophers understand it. Even so, the less people understand of a principle's deep meaning, the more their declarations of allegiance border on rote lip service.

My third closing comment brings us back to Hasidism. Lebens brings out vividly the intellectual power and ingenuity that mark Hasidic thought, thereby correcting an imbalance – many Jews associate Hasidism only with emotion. I don't know whether the complex but elegant case Lebens presents for idealism will resonate among other religious philosophers, even though idealism has become increasingly popular. And Lebens makes clear, after all, that his principles stand even if they are explicated differently, in particular without idealism. But I can't help reflecting (as Lebens does, 220-33) on how this book connects to Jewish historiography. Gershom Scholem, who in the 20th century essentially created the academic field of Kabbalah studies, argued that we must view the Jewish mystical tradition not as an aberration (as it was for rationalistic historians like Heinrich Graetz in the 19th century) but as a deeply embedded element of Jewish thought that profoundly impacted how Jewish history unfolded. Thus sprang up a revamped Jewish historiography, later applied on an even broader scale by scholars such as Moshe Idel. Lebens puts forth a dramatic possibility for a sequel to this historiographic shift: that *the best way to make sense of Judaism philosophically is to enter into conversation with its mystical/Kabbalistic tradition*. So not only does mysticism run through Jewish history, that history, or its recent Hasidic one, may be the source of philosophical truth (or verisimilitude). This view is of a piece with Lebens' championing mystical epistemology in several of his writings.

The notion that Hasidic metaphysics, hardly an approach that captures the fancy of many academics, is in fact a solution to problems that vex them, is surely a surprise. But I was at a conference at which a very famous Christian analytic philosopher argued for a version of idealism, which led some conference members to remark (hyperbolically), "He rediscovered Tanya!"

Who would have thought that Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi could become a protagonist in analytic philosophy of religion? Will he? Will more theists come to embrace some form of idealism, even if they reject EHI? Will other philosophers follow Lebens (and others) and facilitate the union of mystical traditions with analytic philosophy? Interesting questions. Only time, or hyper-time, will tell.