Samuel Lebens, The Principles of Judaism

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). Pp. xviii + 352. £75.00/$100.00 (Hbk). ISBN 9780198843252.

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(Received 20 July 2021; revised 4 November 2021; accepted 13 December 2021; first published online 14 January 2022)

Sometime in the past decade, analytic philosophy of Judaism was born. Until then, there was almost no one whose main speciality it was, and no volume whose main theme it was, even as a handful of analytic philosophers doubled or dabbled as Jewish theologians. Now, there are conferences, blogs, networks of scholars, and thousands of published pages dedicated to exploring Jewish ideas through the distinct lens of contemporary analytic philosophy. The field is suddenly here, it seems, and quickly growing.

If one philosopher stands out as the force behind its emergence, Samuel Lebens, Research Fellow at the University of Haifa, is a reasonable contender. A few others joined him in pioneering the terrain – Aaron Segal, Dani Rabinowitz, Melis Erdur, and Tyron Goldschmidt, for example. And there were senior philosophers who had already broken some of the rougher ground – Jerome Gellman, Eli Hirsch, David Shatz, Josef Stern, and Howard Wettstein, for example. But Lebens was the first to call specifically and publicly for the field as an independent homeland for their work. It was his vision, and fortunately, he had a most efficacious will.

That vision was undeniably realized by the time *Jewish Philosophy in an Analytic Age* was published by Oxford University Press in 2019. Edited by Lebens, Rabinowitz, and Segal, it offered up a dozen or so new essays, all by analytically trained philosophers (including the three editors), as exemplars.

Now Lebens has branched out, producing a treatise that crystallizes his ideal of what the field has to offer. *The Principles of Judaism* is a masterpiece of ingenuity and scholarship, blended in the service of bold, formidable arguments.

Its main purpose is to set out and develop the principles that jointly make up the theological foundation of Orthodox Judaism:

> (1) the universe is the creation of one God; (2) the Torah is a divine system of laws and wisdom, revealed to us by the creator of the universe; and (3) the creator exercises providential care over his creation, manifest in the creator's continued sustenance of the world, reward and punishment for human action, and in the promise of ultimate salvation. (3)

In setting out these axioms, Lebens offers an alternative to Maimonides's Thirteen Principles of Faith. Unlike Maimonides, however, Lebens does not present his tenets as absolute requirements for Orthodox Jews. Instead, he seems to allow that a fully Orthodox Jew might doubt, say, that God always punishes wrongdoers or promises ultimate salvation. Lebens does argue that Orthodox Jews should accept at least some elements of each of the principles – but not on pain of being *kofrim* (deniers), as I read him, but rather on pain of diverging too much from anything recognizably distinct as Orthodox Judaism (275).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441252100055X Published online by Cambridge University Press

The same is true of the way Lebens develops the axioms. Most of the book amounts to extended arguments for how to interpret and expand on the three principles: what is the best way to understand divine creation or divine authorship of the Torah, for example, or divine intervention in human affairs, especially in light of the philosophical concerns that threaten these articles of faith? Here, too, Lebens defends his answers as the *best* interpretations of the core principles, rather than the *only* permissible ones. The book is, in short, a work of analytic philosophy of religion, rather than a catechism, applied to some of the central concerns of the Jewish faith.

That is not to say that it is typical of such work. For example, Lebens's three principles do not explicitly refer to any of the standard tropes of analytic theology, like views about what God, qua the object of the concept 'god', must necessarily be like – omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and so on – and what else we can say or challenge about God on that basis. Quite a few of Lebens's key arguments stand independently of those ideas. But they do make appearances in the book – which I suppose is unavoidable. One of the trademarks of the new field, after all, is its hard-nosed commitment both to traditional articles of faith and to the uncompromising scrutiny of philosophical argumentation. So it is only fitting that it reflects and builds on the preoccupations of a field that has long shared those same commitments. Indeed, Lebens and his fellow analytic Jewish pioneers are steeped in classical philosophy of religion, their fluency ranging over the ideas of Augustine, Aquinas, Anselm, and their successors from Oxford to South Bend, along with their challengers from Hume to Russell.

But as Jewish philosophers, they have some of their own fish to pickle. One of them concerns the origins of the Torah (Principle 2). Orthodox Judaism, especially in recent centuries, has clung unquestioningly to the tenet of divine authorship as the basis for the Torah's normative authority, and by extension that of Judaism writ large. For the most part, the only recent exception was a minority proclaiming itself 'open Orthodox', who welcomed challenges to divine authorship as unquestioningly – and unexaminedly – as their more conservative counterparts rejected them. Either way, the Orthodox approach, with a few exceptions, left deep mysteries about exactly what a commitment to divine authorship meant – was it every word, or just some of the commandments, or the inspiration behind the core ideas? – and how it could be squared with the well-known textual, archaeological, and historical evidence of *human* authorship.

Lebens enters the discussion facing the challenges head-on, not only the familiar qualms of biblical critics, but new challenges that agonize analytic philosophers, in particular, such as the ethical difficulties of seeing certain dictates as divinely authored. In my favourite part of *The Principles of Judaism*, Lebens exhaustively lays out the many challenges to an unexamined, orthodox view of divine authorship – putting them more clearly and devastatingly than the most militant of biblical critics – before meeting them with his own novel theory of the revelation (158–176; 209–219).

That theory deserves close attention. Lebens assumes, first, that there are two Torahs, the Heavenly Torah and the Earthly Torah. The Heavenly Torah is what God meant to convey and command in his act of presenting (at least part of) the Pentateuch at Sinai – the way a perfect, ideal interpreter would understand it. The Earthly Torah, in contrast, consists in how God's revelation is *actually* understood by the leading authoritative readers of the Pentateuch in each generation – the readers who are, as Lebens puts it, 'most committed to the study and practice' of God's directives as expressed in the Pentateuch (186–188). Notice that this heaven–earth pair cuts across the familiar difference between the 'written Torah', the explicit content of the Pentateuch, and the 'oral Torah', the hidden and implicit meanings, applications and elaborations of the Pentateuch unearthed by rabbinic authorities in their attempts to legalize and apply it. *Both* the written and oral Torah would count as the Heavenly Torah if the rabbinic interpretations and applications

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441252100055X Published online by Cambridge University Press

were correct – capturing the revelation as it was originally meant; in contrast, the 'Earthly Torah' consists in the written and oral Torahs as rabbis earnestly but fallibly come to them in each generation.

Lebens's second, more original thesis states that God intentionally delivered both the Heavenly and Earthly Torahs. He authored the Heavenly Torah, of course, but also put in place and – more importantly – *endorsed* and *appropriated* the human process by which the Earthly Torah emerges, unfolds and evolves through the ages, on a trajectory towards merging eventually with the Heavenly Torah (186). Indeed, he endorsed it in the same act of Revelation at Sinai by which he presented the Heavenly Torah, so that at any given moment the Earthly Torah has God's imprimatur, if not his full agreement with its present-day content.

That is not to say the Earthly Torah won't get some things very wrong. A generation's leading interpreters may read God as supportive of slavery and even the occasional unjust war. But through the generations, they transcend to more enlightened readings, rejecting (though still respecting) the limited ideas of their forbears as the best they can do for their time.

Still, every one of these successive interpretations has the spark of the divine, even the earliest ones, fruits of a tree planted and nurtured by God at Sinai. And, as importantly, God guides or intervenes in this process to ensure that the tree arches towards Heaven, with each generation yielding a new crop of legitimate interpretations of the Heavenly Torah, however imperfect and incomplete.

Lebens's own interpretation of divine revelation similarly has a lot to recommend it. First, it resolves the puzzle of how we can see even the inaccurate results of a fallible process as the word of God, without undermining that process itself as a faithful quest for the truly accurate word. More importantly, Lebens's account preserves the foundational idea of divine authorship of the Torah while accounting for the way some of what we take to be the Torah – even parts of the Pentateuch – seems all too human. It modestly leaves open exactly how much of the Pentateuch itself, as we read it today, is the Heavenly Torah presented for interpretation, and how much is man-made alteration or embellishment of a divine core (182–189). Indeed, Lebens allows, at least as a possibility, that significant portions of the Pentateuch may be humanly authored, even if some of it must have been handed down from God at Sinai – and even if *all* of it must be treated as God's word, at least from the point of view of a faithful stance (here I found Lebens's distinct view of faith, which he calls 'make belief', extremely helpful, though regrettably it comes much later in the book) (274–279).

On this model, challenges from source criticism or from ethics can be accommodated – and even incorporated into future interpretations – while retaining the Torah as a source of divine directives and wisdom in every generation. One can be a conservative traditionalist about where the Torah came from and where it is ultimately going, but a pluralist about what it says in the meantime.

Pluralist to a point, that is. Lebens does not view the divinely ordained interpretative process as a free-for-all. It is, instead, limited to readings of the Torah – the attempt at the Heavenly version – arrived at by those rabbinic authorities in each generation who are 'most committed' to studying and practising it (Tamar Ross is credited with a version of this formulation) (186). So New Age-y revisionism won't do; indeed, anything consciously revisionist is off the table. Authoritative interpretation belongs to the faithful, those striving, however modestly, for an accurate rendering of the Heavenly Torah (even if, in the back of their minds, they know they'll never fully get it).

Of course, the question of who among the faithful count as authoritative readers, custodians of the Earthly Torah, is a frequent bone of contention. Generally, we associate 'most committed' to studying and practising the Torah – Lebens's qualification – with

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the camps in Orthodox Judaism who emphasize constant learning and stringent observance. But that rigs things a little. When the authoritative badge of 'da'as Torah' – the official consensus of Orthodox sages – went to heads of yeshivas dedicated to full-time Torah study, it soon became received wisdom that all who are intellectually able should spend their days in (surprise!) full-time Torah study. In a host of similar ways, the 'most committed' tend to read the Heavenly Torah as prescribing their 'most committed' ways. That is, perhaps, why the interpretations of the Torah-true lifestyle due to Yishayahu Leibowitz, David Hartman, Blu Greenberg, and Yitz Greenberg are not quite the Orthodox mainstream; they arguably call for less commitment than most accepted Orthodox decisors would permit themselves to live by. And that, perhaps, counts against using their level of commitment as qualifications.

These worries about credentials should not be seen as criticisms of Lebens's theory, but as invitations to develop or interpret it in certain directions. On the whole I find it just about the most convincing and inspiring view of divine revelation to come from Orthodox Judaism in . . . well, ever. It is, to my mind, a perfect testament to the power of analytic philosophy and Jewish learning to enrich and enlighten one another, and I hope others will gain as much from it as I did.

And it is not the only such testament; there are similar gems throughout the book, I thought, including an innovative take on faith and how it differs from belief (287–297). Which is not to say I agreed with everything in *The Principles of Judaism*. I'll close with two points of disagreement.

In developing his interpretation of the first principle, Lebens argues compellingly that *creatio originalis ex nihilo* – creation from nothing – is the most plausible understanding of divine creation of the world, in terms of both faithfulness to the balance of Judaic sources and independent philosophical considerations. But I could not follow Lebens from here to his more dramatic twist on creation, which he calls 'Hasidic Idealism': the view that all of us – and everything in our world – are ideas in God's mind.

Lebens's first argument for this head-whirling conclusion begins with two steps. One is the thesis that everything in the world – down to its every last feature – was willed that way by God. The second is the observation that whenever anything seems to depend so completely on someone's will – like fictional characters on the creative will of an author – it is an idea in someone's mind. No counterexamples seem to challenge this observation, Lebens notes (73). But the generalization seems suspect to me, inasmuch as it draws exclusively from the class of human beings, who differ from divine ones precisely in their *inability* to bring things into bodily existence exactly as they will them to be. The closer any *human* creation is to the will of its creator, the more likely it is to be a mere idea – hence Lebens's generalization – but that is just to restate the limitations of human creative power. To derive anything from it about the products of God's will is like inferring that birds fly on motorized planes because that's how every person I know flies.

This is not to deny the evocative power and resourcefulness of the thesis that we are ideas in God's mind, which among other things explains how God could create what he is not, and what seems unworthy of him. In these and other ways, the theory is impressive; I wish I could go there. One further ground for hesitation, though, is that I'm not sure where 'there' really is, and how far it is from here: God's ideas, like his other intentional properties, are so different from our own as to render somewhat mysterious what it might be like to be His idea, and how different it is from the corporeal existence we already think we have.

It would, of course, be big metaphysical news if it turned out we resided exclusively in an ideational ether, something like Spinoza's attribute of Thought or Strawson's pure sound world, floating among the names or noises with only the illusion of extended

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existence. But the moral or theological news would be far less dramatic, it seems to me, unless this discovery about our geography or constitution mattered for how we experience life, or how (or whether) we impact the way our fellows experience it.

One way being an idea *could* matter theologically is if, as Lebens suggests, we are *mere* ideas, in the sense of being unreal or less real, the way fictional characters are 'mere' acts of the author's imagination. That is why we can forgive a novelist for inflicting so much suffering on her protagonists; there is, in fact, no real suffering that takes place. It is something the novelist consciously *makes up*, rather than just *makes*. Perhaps the protagonists themselves wouldn't forgive her as readily, but there is no logical space in which they are her victims: in the world in which they *actually* suffer, they are *not* fictional, and so have no author to blame for their plight. But we presumably coexist with the God who created us, relating to him – Lebens says – as our maker (273). And we cannot as easily deny that we suffer, nor that we can trace that suffering to our maker, whatever strange metaphysical (or literary) route the causal path takes.

Of course, Lebens differs from some analytically minded theologians in his willingness to face human suffering, and to resist the kind of easy apologetics that tries to fit it comfortably into the world as we know it ('it's all for the best'). Lebens would rather reject the world as we know it. To that end, the book's third part – developing Principle 3 – constructs a radical metaphysics, involving a dynamic philosophy of time that enables us to envision God as redeeming the world by, among other things, changing the past (!). Lebens is lured to such exotic frontiers in part because, as he says, 'Judaism needs a theodicy': Judaism needs a way to reconcile God's goodness with the suffering and evil in the world (233).

But does it really? To me, at least, many Judaic sources seem to romanticize the *demand* for a theodicy – as when a long-suffering Job cries out to God and insists he should have done better. Or when Abraham and Moses challenge God's decrees as they hear them, in light of the undeserved suffering they stand to inflict. Or when Moses (in a Talmudic tale) prophetically witnesses the great rabbinic martyrs tortured to death by Roman executioners and cries out, 'is this Torah, and this its reward?' Judaic sources celebrate the heartbroken call for a more just world in harmony with God's will as we thought we knew it. But I don't see them, on balance, insisting that we *answer* that call. Recall that the apologists who try to console Job are rebuked in the end; God would rather disappoint than be flattered by rationalizations.

At any rate, whether Judaism resists or encourages theodicies, it seems to have fared well enough without a definitive one until now; to say Judaism needs one close to its core seems to me a bit strong. Perhaps Lebens means only that it needs the reassurance that there is one to be found eventually, a Heavenly Theodicy up there with the Heavenly Torah, solving the Problem of Evil in a way we do not yet grasp. To believe that there may be such a solution, though, is hardly to have a clear idea of it, much less to believe it will specifically involve reward and punishment as earthly judges understand them.

That said, Lebens's ingenious theodicy is as effective as any prior effort I have read. Like an intricate Talmudic debate, I am inspired and energized by it even where I feel it goes too far for me. And so it is with *The Principles of Judaism* in general. For that, I am grateful to Lebens, as I believe we all should be, for his masterful contribution to Jewish thought, analytic philosophy, and best of all, to the space they increasingly share.

doi:10.1017/S003441252100055X