

Jewish Philosophy: between Jerusalem and Athens

Sandu Frunzã: *Philosophy and Judaism. An Answer to the Question: "What is Jewish Philosophy?"*

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In the volume entitled *Philosophy and Judaism. An Answer to the Question: "What is Jewish Philosophy?"* (Cluj-Napoca, Limes Publishing House, 2006, pp. 159) Sandu Frunzã proposes a specialist's extremely elaborated perspective on the antique and medieval Jewish philosophy.

The volume is the first of a series of three books in which the author outlines possible answers to the difficult question formulated in the title. One of the answers, the one offered in this volume, has as a starting point two representative figures of antique and medieval philosophy, Philo and Maimonides. Another answer, which will constitute the subject of the next volume of this project, can be given by surveying the works of some famous names of modern Jewish philosophy; while the third answer, offered in a third volume, will be based on the philosophy subsequent to the Holocaust.

The author announces from the beginning that the metaphor of the cities Jerusalem and Athens or of the realms of Israel and Greece has an essential role in the logic of this book. This metaphor describes the dynamics of the relationship between philosophy and religion, a relationship with varied forms having a decisive role in outlining the sphere of Jewish philosophy. "Jewish philosophy – Sandu Frunzã says – proposes a privileged modality for understanding Judaism by the encounter between philosophy and religion as the founding polarity of a creative tradition."

The first part of the volume is a general introduction to the proposed subject. Firstly, the author presents the classical solutions to the problem of the circumscription of Jewish philosophical sphere proposed by the formalist and essentialist perspectives and analysed by Raphael Jospe.

The *formalist* perspective indicates an exact criterion –such as language or belonging to the community of Israel – for circumscribing

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the Jewish philosophical sphere. In this way an uncomplicated though oversimplified view on Jewish philosophy is established.

The *essentialist* discussion proposes the existence of an essence of Judaism according to which a philosophical system is or is not Jewish. This perspective, however, does not offer a coherent explicative model, being, according to Raphael Jospe, rather prescriptive than descriptive. The attempt to find some criteria or elements that should constitute the essence of Jewish philosophy is destined to failure because of the diversity of Jewish philosophical thinking.

At this point Sandu Frunzã states that one of the great provocations formulated by Jewish philosophy is exactly "to go beyond the formalist-essentialist divergence by analysing different systems of thought, which offer a series of special modalities for establishing the relationship between philosophy and religion."

Another level discussed while attempting to outline the necessary background for the formulation of an answer to the question "what is Jewish philosophy?" is the chronological perspective. Sandu Frunzã analyses several approaches such as Isaac Husik's, according to which Jewish philosophy can be identified only in the past, or Daniel H. Frank's opinion who sustains that we can talk about Jewish philosophy only from the beginning of the 20th century when this academic discipline appeared. Regarding the place of Jewish philosophy as a part of philosophy in general, the author mentions Warren Zev Harvey's analyses on the historiographic perspectives of some philosophers such as Hegel, Wolfson, Strauss or Pines.

Later on, the possibility of the existence of a Judaic theology is discussed, several options being mentioned: on the one hand, that which sustains that theology is a Christian invention having no equivalent in Jewish thinking; on the other hand, that which thinks, as Louis Jacobs did, that there is a Jewish theology and that this is given more and more attention these days. Sandu Frunzã analyses in more detail and somewhat critically the perspective on theology in the Jewish context, proposed by Manfred H. Vogel, who redefines what modernity presents as philosophic reflection as authentic Jewish philosophy.

The metaphor of Jerusalem and Athens, a metaphor which accompanies the reader during the entire book, will be discussed once again when Leo Strauss' position regarding the relationship between the two is presented.

Strauss thinks that the particularity of Athens consists of the option for the individual, independence and knowledge, while Jerusalem

is characterized by dependence and affection, in the biblical reference to honour one's father and mother. In this way the idea of a permanent conflict between philosophy and religion and the impossibility of their coexistence in a coherent cultural construction is outlined. The secret of western civilization consists exactly of the attempt to put together thought and faith. The metaphor of the two cities expresses the fundamental tension between the philosophers' God and Abraham's Isaac's and Jacob's God, the irreconcilable isolation of reason and faith.

The author presents at this point how A. J. Heschel proposes to surpass the impossibility of reconciliation between reason and faith. He too resorts to the metaphor of the two symbolic cities, Athens and Jerusalem at the meeting point of which Jewish philosophy should be constituted. It is possible to keep the two poles in balance if their meeting is imagined as an ellipsis. Jewish philosophy appears as an "elliptic thinking", since it revolves around two central points: philosophy and religion. "Because the tension resulted from the competition of the two powers this thinking with an elliptic orbit continuously gives new senses to the meeting between philosophy and religion." (p. 53.)

Sandu Frunzã thinks that this perspective is to be preferred to the others because it proposes a possibility for avoiding the conflict between Jerusalem and Athens by establishing a dialogical relationship between reason and faith.

Further on, the author presents, by analysing Philo of Alexandria's philosophy, one of the possible answers to the question raised by the subtitle of the volume.

To start with, Sandu Frunzã mentions the periods Jewish philosophy is usually divided into: the antique period which lasted to the destruction of the Temple and its emblematic figure being Philo of Alexandria; the medieval period which ended with Uriel da Costa and whose exemplary figure was Maimonides; the modern age between Spinoza, Mendelssohn and the Holocaust; the contemporary period beginning with the founding of Israel.

Another division into periods was proposed by Wolfson; this has as a criterion the relationship with the Scriptures. Thus, the history of philosophy is divided into: the philosophy which does not know the Scriptures, the philosophy which serves the Scriptures and that which wants to free itself from the influence of the Scriptures.

Further on, there are analyzed different approaches to the relationship between philosophy and tradition at Philo, approaches

proposed by different thinkers, such as Wolfson, Shlomo Pines, Cohn-Sherbok or Guttman.

The author believes that Philo thought philosophy was the divine gift given to the Greeks in order to discover by the way of reason that which had been given to the Jews through revelation. In this sense it is useful to mention the metaphor of the two callings, a metaphor referring in fact to religion and philosophy: the calling of Moses, who loved virtue and was loved by God and reveals himself to him, and the calling of Bezaleel, who was chosen to be the artist of the Tabernacle and of all the things in it, and who knows God only by the means of his creation. The conclusion is in this context that both faith and reason, both religion and philosophy belong to a reality named by Philo Wisdom.

The relationship between philosophy and wisdom can be integrated into the paradigm of the two cities according to Sandu Frunzã. In Philo's case these two symbolic cities are integrated by "the medium of virtue, a virtue which is valorised as devotion and as mystical experience." It is essential to take into consideration this "ritualization of thinking, which requires that tradition should be adapted to the field of philosophy and that philosophical and religious reflection should return to a creative stage of tradition."

The author accords an important role to the presentation of the Christian reading of the Philonian philosophy in the analysis of the Jewish thinker's system. Here Sandu Frunzã refers, among other authors, to the Philonian exegeses of the Christian theologian Ioan Chirilã, who, affirming that Philo's oeuvre is not a "pre-Christian intuition", but "an elevation towards the Logos", manages to avoid the trap and temptation of some sub-textual readings or of exaggerated connections.

Another emblematic figure of Jewish thought, Moses Maimonides is the subject of the analysis which outlines the necessary background for the circumscription of the Jewish philosophical sphere.

Sandu Frunzã states that the analyses regarding the place of philosophy in Jewish thinking emphasize its preponderantly hermeneutic character. In this context is situated another important aspect for understanding Jewish philosophy, the meeting between philosophy, mysticism and Judaic tradition. A decisive moment in this sense is, according to the author, the meeting between Maimonides and those exegetes of his work who were preoccupied with the redefinition of the relationship between philosophy and esoteric thinking, in this case, the Cabbala.

The author differentiates between two types of attitudes towards Maimonides and the *Guide of the Perplexed*: on the one hand, the acceptance of the possibility that philosophy and the religious tradition can be comprised in one exercise of thinking; on the other hand, the emphasising of the esoteric character of philosophy. Thus, the mystical sphere is the medium which offers the balance between philosophy and Judaism.

Referring to the complex relations between philosophy and Jewish mystical thinking, the author mentions Moshe Idel's works which analyzed this subject. Idel, Sandu Frunzã tells, managed to perceive the phenomenon in its complexity, being aware of the variety of nuances. Similarly, our author insists upon the perspective proposed by Moshe Halbertal who attached great importance to Maimonides' esoteric preoccupations. Frunzã declares, relying on his complex analyses, that "Maimonides and his exegetes invest philosophy with the status of a practice which helps us to orientate ourselves in the world of secrets and secrecy."

Another discussed subject is the controversy between the Maimonidian perspective – which claims that it invented an alternative to antique esotericism – and the cabbalists. This controversy leads, according to Moshel Idel, to a powerful development of the esoteric tradition.

Sandu Frunzã, in what follows, analyzes in detail the effects and the controversies generated by the revolutionary Maimonidian conception, which made a clear break and provoked many very different reactions by reinterpreting in a rationalist manner the Jewish tradition.

The general reception of Maimonides in Christian intellectual circles is varied, but it is included, however, by a specific pattern. Étienne Gilson, whose attitude towards the Jewish philosopher is also analyzed, complies with this pattern too.

In spite of the extremely different reactions to Maimonides and though the importance of his work has been minimized (to this effect the author mentions the fact that Hegel dealt with him in less than a page in his famous history of philosophy), Sandu Frunzã considers him "the most significant personality of medieval Jewish philosophy", a personality whose oeuvre represents an indispensable subject of analysis if one tries to outline an answer to the question "what is Jewish philosophy?"

The last chapter of the book is very suggestively entitled *From Jerusalem to Athens and back*. It is both the conclusion of the book and,

at the same time, an opening towards the subject which will be the basis of the next volume of the project the author intends to continue.

Sandu Frunzã asserts that the influence of religious tradition upon the thinking of an author who belongs to this tradition is profound and cannot be ignored. In spite of the diffused Aristotelian or Neo-Platonist elements, the author says, antique and medieval Jewish philosophy identifies itself with the contents of Jewish tradition. The discussion on the question what makes a work Jewish in its character is quite complex as Alexander Broadie's analysis proves this.

The relationship between tradition and philosophical meditation, specific to the antique and medieval Jewish context is mentioned too by Sandu Frunzã when he says that, though philosophy is situated under the badge of the exigencies of the Scriptures, religious authority is not a dogmatic one and philosophy has not an ancillary situation in the context of thinking. Antique and medieval Jewish philosophers wanted to show first of all that "philosophy and religion have a common content and in the formula *Jewish philosophy* the two are integrated – in different formulas and in different measure – in a common Judaic tradition." The examples of Philo and Maimonides give account of a much more complex relationship between philosophy and religion than the model of ancillary situation of philosophy; a complex relationship in which "the integrating force of tradition" ensures the balance between the two cities.

Sandu Frunzã, applying once again the metaphor of the two symbolic cities, reports the fact that Jewish philosophers practicing an "elliptic thinking" remain in the sphere of a "between", as a form of thinking auto-exiled from both cities. He is not satisfied with this "paradigm of exile" and proceeds introducing another paradigm, offered by "the dynamics of exile–redemption". This, postulating the journey from Jerusalem towards Athens, but also the return home, makes possible to avoid the estrangement from both cities.

Moving away from Leo Strauss' conception, Sandu Frunzã perceives Jewish philosophy as the phenomenon which manages to diminish significantly the tension between Jerusalem and Athens.

The manner in which the subject is approached, the impressive amount of knowledge offered to us and the originality with which the author places the information in the frame formed by the possible answers to the question "what is Jewish philosophy?" make Sandu Frunzã's extremely profound and erudite study an indispensable instrument for those interested in Jewish culture.