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# Star-Crossed

*Peter Eli Gordon*

**Rosenzweig and Heidegger:  
Between Judaism and German  
Philosophy**

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328 pages.*

*Reviewed by Jerome E. Copulsky*

**F**ranz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) is often considered one of the most original and innovative modern Jewish thinkers, but he is also one of the most misunderstood. Born into an assimilated family, Rosenzweig set out on a promising academic career. But like other young intellectuals of his time, he found himself in the midst of a spiritual crisis, finding no solace in academic philosophy. In 1913, convinced by his friend Eugen Rosenstock that only belief in Christianity could rescue modern man from the impasse of historicism and provide true orientation in life, he prepared himself for conversion. But although

he had decided in favor of Christianity, Rosenzweig chose to walk to the baptismal font as a Jew, and dutifully prepared for his entrance to the Church by attending High Holy Day services in the synagogue. Spiritually, he never left it.

The experience of a Yom Kippur service apparently proved the turning point in the young philosopher's life. Christianity was no longer necessary, and from then on, he threw himself deeply into the study of Jewish texts. Upon his return from World War I, Rosenzweig published his dissertation, but in 1920, he rejected an offer for an academic position. Rosenzweig confessed to his academic mentor that "scholarship no longer holds the center of my attention... my life has fallen under the rule of a 'dark drive' which I'm aware that I merely name by calling it 'my Judaism.'" Instead of becoming a professor, Rosenzweig became instead the director of the new *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus* in Frankfurt.

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Rosenzweig's rather idiosyncratic interpretation of Judaism presented an alternative to the theological options of assimilationist Judaism, neo-Orthodoxy, and what Rosenzweig deemed the "atheistic" theology of Martin Buber's early speeches, which stressed the peculiar national psychology of the Jews; it was also an alternative to the Zionist political and cultural projects. Unlike the liberal Jewish theologians, Rosenzweig was not concerned with finding a way to accommodate Judaism to the contemporary political and cultural order; he was uninterested in showing that Judaism, correctly understood, was compatible with, or sustained, modern politics. Nor was he moved by the attempt to establish a Jewish state. Judaism as Rosenzweig understood it provided the escape from such worldly entanglements.

In 1922, Rosenzweig was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's disease), and was expected to die in a year's time. Yet he continued with his projects, translating a portion of the Bible with Buber, a collection of poems by Judah Ha-levi and a commentary upon them, and composing letters and essays on a variety of subjects. For seven years he struggled with his illness until death finally took him in December 1929. His work lived on, lovingly carried

to the new centers of Jewish life—America and Israel—by his friends and disciples, such as Gershom Scholem and Nahum Glatzer, whose 1953 anthology, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought*, brought the philosopher to the attention of the English-reading public. Yet owing to the details of his biography and to the enormous difficulty of his thought, it is not surprising that the image of Rosenzweig has often yielded to the temptations of hagiography. It was the image of man, and the possibility of an intellectually robust attachment to Judaism in the modern world, rather than the philosophy itself, that funded so much interest. Rosenzweig, who had so inspired his students in Weimar Germany, was now recast for an American Jewry eager for new models of Jewish authenticity. In short, respect was paid to Rosenzweig the saint, not Rosenzweig the philosopher.

Although Rosenzweig may have forsaken the academy for Jewish life, the academy did not forsake him. Thinkers as diverse as Leo Strauss, Emmanuel Levinas, and Hilary Putnam have drawn inspiration from Rosenzweig's thought, and in recent years a veritable cottage industry of Rosenzweig scholarship has emerged, with practitioners in America, Europe, and Israel. Scholars tend to place Rosenzweig within the canon of

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“Jewish philosophy,” or the trajectory of German-Jewish thought, or as a herald of post-modernism. A number of recent approaches to Rosenzweig’s thought have taken their cue from Levinas, who had stated his indebtedness to Rosenzweig, and have tried to illuminate the relationship between the two. Such a connection provides an alternate history of modern philosophy; Levinas’ critique of Martin Heidegger is found to have its origin in Rosenzweig’s “new thinking.”

But such scholars are faced with the uncomfortable fact that Rosenzweig understood his intellectual position somewhat differently. In particular, they must contend with Rosenzweig’s assessment of Heidegger. In May 1929, Rosenzweig wrote an essay called “Exchanged Fronts” (*Vertauschte Fronten*), which gave his views about the debate that had just occurred between Ernst Cassirer and Heidegger at the Swiss mountain resort of Davos.

“Exchanged Fronts” begins as an announcement of a new, corrected edition of Hermann Cohen’s posthumous work, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*. The stakes for Rosenzweig in this book were high. He believed that, in the last years of his life, the master took a dramatic turn from his Idealism to what Rosenzweig called “the new thinking.” There were therefore two images

of Cohen—the sage of Marburg, still stuck in the flawed Idealist project, and the prophet of “the new thinking.” But the advent of the new edition of *Religion*, Rosenzweig asserts, is important not because of the work’s “classical character,” but because of its “current significance.” And it was at Davos that the late master’s turn had become public, in “a representative confrontation between the old and the new thinking.” It was in this confrontation that “Cassirer, Cohen’s most distinguished disciple,” was met by Heidegger, who “advocated against Cassirer a philosophical position that is precisely our position, that of the new thinking, which falls entirely in line with what starts from that ‘last Cohen.’” In other words, Heidegger’s analysis of the horizon of human existence emerges from the turn taken by Cohen’s late philosophy. In short, Rosenzweig saw the Davos disputation as a struggle between the old and the new Cohen, a bout in which the old had been decisively and publicly defeated. Rosenzweig snatched the garland from the neo-Kantian, liberal, assimilated Jew, Cassirer, and dubbed Heidegger—former Catholic and future Nazi—Cohen’s heir apparent.

And herein lies the problem. For Heidegger’s story is deeply troubling. In 1933, Heidegger publicly decided in favor of Hitler, joining the Nazi

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Party and taking up the position of rector of the University of Freiberg. Though he left his post after a year, he never disavowed his involvement, and as late as 1935 could still speak of “the inner truth and greatness of this movement.” Ever since, Heidegger’s supporters and opponents have quarreled about the meaning and extent of his engagement with National Socialism.

**H**ow does one deal with the saint’s praise of the villain? One way is simply to deny the charge. Devotees of Rosenzweig wary of Heidegger’s shadow have argued that the Jewish thinker knew little about either the Davos encounter or Heidegger’s thought outside of the secondhand reports from newspapers. Rosenzweig’s judgment therefore should not be taken too seriously. We have no evidence that Rosenzweig had read Heidegger’s 1927 work, *Being and Time*. (For that matter, we have no evidence that Heidegger had heard of, let alone read, the little-known author of *The Star of Redemption*.) Rosenzweig was simply swept up in enthusiasm about a merely perceived affinity; if he had known more, the argument goes, he surely would have been less sanguine about the connection. And Rosenzweig can scarcely be blamed for not anticipating Heidegger’s

subsequent embrace of National Socialism.

Yet one may still ask whether Rosenzweig was as insightful an interpreter of Heidegger as he was of Cohen, perceiving a commonality of mood and purpose that was not really there. Was Rosenzweig unaware of the *völkisch* implications of Heidegger’s thought? Would Rosenzweig have been as horrified by Heidegger’s denial of a horizon of eternity as his defenders claim he would be?

This argument was made forcefully by Heidegger’s student Karl Löwith, in an article entitled “M. Heidegger and F. Rosenzweig, or, Temporality and Eternity,” published in 1942 in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. Löwith acknowledged the “common starting point” of the two thinkers—“the naked individual in its finite existence as it precedes all civilization”—their mutual stress on the temporal and finite nature of human living as opposed to the timelessness of Being. And he conceded a similarity in the manner of philosophical expression, in their emphasis on human language for the disclosure of meaning.

Yet, for Löwith, these similarities masked a more profound difference. While his former master had located meaning in limited temporality, Rosenzweig’s thought opened up to an expectation of eternity. The

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implication of this difference could be seen in Heidegger's terrible political decision of 1933. According to Löwith, it was Heidegger's very denial of eternity, his demand to locate authentic human existence in temporality, which led to such disastrous political consequences. Unlike those who saw Heidegger's decision as foolish or opportunistic, Löwith maintained that it was bound up in his philosophical outlook. Without the anchor of eternal verities or a horizon outside historical time, such a choice was inevitable. As he put it, "the possibility of a Heideggerian political philosophy was not born as a result of a regrettable 'miscue,' but from the very conception of existence that simultaneously combats and absorbs the *Zeitgeist*." The decisive break with the history of philosophy was matched by a refusal of modern democratic politics. By contrast, Rosenzweig's achievement of the experience of eternity in life, in his interpretation of Judaism and Christian ways of being in the world, provides the individual with a grounding in truth outside of his own finitude, a sturdy foundation upon which one may face the tremors of the age.

Peter Eli Gordon's admirable new study, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy*, serves as a belated rejoinder to

Löwith's analysis. Gordon, associate professor of modern European history at Harvard, has previously published an excellent review essay entitled "Rosenzweig Redux: The Reception of German Jewish Thought," and his book represents a turning point in the scholarly approach to Rosenzweig, by returning him to his historical and intellectual context. If matters were as simple as Löwith presented them, Gordon argues, if Rosenzweig ended up affirming a traditional theological position, "then there would be no innovation in Rosenzweig's new thinking." Rather, "Rosenzweig's new thinking was... new precisely because it aimed to wrest itself free of the traditional, theological category of eternity, even while it struggled to find theological purpose within the confines of human, temporal life." Thus, the distinction between Rosenzweig and Heidegger cannot be drawn as neatly as Löwith would have it. And reconsidering Rosenzweig's particular philosophical position, his embrace of eternity in the world, therefore entails re-evaluating the political implications of his thought.

Gordon traces Rosenzweig's understanding of his intellectual position, and explores the "intimate commonality of ideas" of the German philosophical expressionism that emerged in the cultural and political tumult of World War I and the

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Weimar era. Born of a crisis of confidence in the power of philosophical idealism, philosophical expressionism emerged as “a distinctive intellectual orientation poised between the religious nostalgia for origin and the modernist struggle to move beyond metaphysics.” This mood was shaped by the forces of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard; it was marked by a thoroughgoing critique of the philosophical tradition, an attempt to return to authentic religious experience before metaphysical obscurantism, and the quest for a redemption, not in the timeless speculations of Idealism, but in everyday life. The entire philosophical tradition had been so many attempts at avoiding the real question. The philosopher had sought serenity in the timeless halls of reason, but Rosenzweig believed that in the end, metaphysical speculation offered only a false promise of liberation, a denial of life itself. Though it tried hard to deny it, philosophy could not stand up to the fact of human finitude. It could not teach us how to live.

Throughout his book, Gordon proves himself a sensitive and intrepid reader of Rosenzweig and an able navigator of the landscape of prior Rosenzweig interpretation. The first chapters situate Rosenzweig’s intellectual development in the context of his research on Hegel and Hermann Cohen’s late philosophy. Gordon

provides a pithy analysis of Rosenzweig’s doctoral dissertation, and first book, *Hegel and the State*, a text too often ignored by Rosenzweig scholars who take too literally his claim to have moved beyond it. Gordon considers this book not only for its part in the unfolding of Rosenzweig’s intellectual development, but for its effect on Rosenzweig’s interpretation of Judaism. It is from Hegel’s critique of early Christianity, Gordon writes, that Rosenzweig was able to envision the continuation of German nationalism in a new form, “a form of collective life without the metaphysical dangers of statehood.” Rosenzweig’s peculiar vision of Jewish existence, in other words, may turn out to be Hegelian in inspiration.

The core of Gordon’s book is an illuminating discussion of the nature of Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption* (1921). Composed on military postcards on the Balkan front during World War I, *The Star* remains one of the most intriguing, obscure, and difficult books in modern philosophy. Gordon attends to questions of genre and style, the peculiar architecture of the book, the boldness of its claims to revolutionize philosophy—which, in Gordon’s analysis, turns out to be noticeably less audacious when *The Star* is considered in the context of the crisis of

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German philosophy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through all of this, Gordon treats *The Star* as Rosenzweig intended it, not as a baroque confession of faith, but as a philosophical system in its own right, to be handled not with pious reverence, but with critical, though passionate, engagement. Gordon proves to be an expert guide through this notoriously labyrinthine work.

The purpose of *The Star*, Gordon writes, is to develop a 'phenomenology of religion' based on lived experience, "without recourse to the language of the metaphysical tradition," to rediscover tradition after the encrustations of hundreds of years of philosophizing and theologizing have been scraped away. Rosenzweig believed he heard in the biblical text the authentic voice of revelation, the call of God to man, and he believed he saw in religious community the response of man to his neighbor. The upshot of such a phenomenology of religious experience was the articulation of a worldly "redemption" as opposed to otherworldly transcendence. Rosenzweig believed he had found in Jewish life a form of redemption within the world and bounded by finitude. Eternity was discovered in time.

For Rosenzweig, redemption is a binding of man and the world, within time, an anticipation of eternity within life. As Gordon puts it, "What

Rosenzweig calls the 'eternity' of life is really the eternity of a *temporal orientation*; it is a stance toward the future that nonetheless remains within time." This temporal orientation provides meaning for the present, forging a new totality of God, World, and Man, but it is a totality formed by the *relationship* of the three (in the modes of creation, revelation, and redemption), rather than the denial of any difference among them, as in Hegel.

How does one experience eternity in time? For Rosenzweig, it is achieved through the particular form of Jewish communal existence. It is the very exilic situation of the Jewish people—their physical estrangement from their land, peculiar relation to their "holy" language, and fidelity to their "eternal" law—that allows for their redemption-in-the-world. As a "community of blood," the Jews depend upon themselves, their procreative ability, to guarantee their existence, rather than the contingencies of territory and politics. The Jew is always homeless, yet always at home in himself. And it is through the unique liturgical moments of the year—the Jewish calendar—that the Jewish people comes together to awaken its experience of eternity. (Gordon could have paid more attention to how the experience of eternity is achieved through participation in

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the festivals that constitute the Jewish liturgical year, the analysis of which provides the most sustained “phenomenology of religion” in *The Star*.) This is Rosenzweig’s notion of the “messianic politics” of Judaism: The Synagogue is the true city of God, untroubled by the “warlike temporality” of the nations.

*The Star* therefore celebrates exile as the condition of Jewish being-in-the-world. In contrast to Zionists who believed that *galut* perpetuated Jewish suffering and was to some degree responsible for anti-Semitism, Rosenzweig deemed it an “ontological condition” of *das Judentum*, “being Jewish,” which guaranteed its participation in eternity. Redemption was thus premised on a certain estrangement from the world, at least insofar as political life is concerned. Gordon correctly points out that here Rosenzweig breaks decisively from the Jewish tradition of redemption as an end to exile and a re-establishment of Jewish life and sovereignty in the land of Israel. Paradoxically, in Rosenzweig’s view, the Jews experience their redemption in the very situation of believing themselves to be unredeemed. Rosenzweig offers a vision of Judaism as a worldless worldliness, an unredeemed redemption.

Despite the claims that Rosenzweig was an early proponent of a mutual Jewish-Christian dialogue, the two religious communities remain distinct in his system, locked in animosity, at least until the eschaton. While Rosenzweig claimed that the Jewish people received its share of redemption in time, the Christian is always “on the way.” Composed of pagan converts, the Church is tied together in common belief, not by bonds of blood; it must forgo the comfort of Jewish redemption for its work in and through history. It is the Christian anxiety of not-yet-being-redeemed, and the image of the Synagogue outside of history and already there, which Rosenzweig diagnosed as the perennial source of anti-Semitism. Moreover, as a universal community, the Church stands in tension with that other great universal, the State. World history, according to Rosenzweig, amounts to the struggle between the Church and the (still pagan) State over the souls of the people of the world. All these institutions—State, Church, Synagogue—attempt to secure eternity in time, that is, to overcome the problem of temporality and human finitude, but the State’s attempt to wrest eternity into the moment through force is doomed to the

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ongoing course of violence, war, and revolution. The historical process occurs through the growth of the Church, not the State, and the Church's growth in the world and in time is given its orientation by the Jewish people and its "messianic politics." In contrast to Hegel, it is the very timelessness of the Synagogue, its estrangement from the vicissitudes of history and politics, which provides its ongoing spiritual relevance. In this way—and this point is stressed by Rosenzweig partisans—the universal meaning of Judaism is disclosed: Judaism has a perennial mission in and for the world, even if Jews remain unaware of it.

Gordon's chapters on *The Star* therefore culminate in a sustained comparison of the structure of Rosenzweigian redemption with Heidegger's account of authenticity in *Being and Time*. Gordon perceives in both Rosenzweig and Heidegger not only a similar starting point and philosophical method, but also a comparable mood and attempt to pull transcendence into the here and now. "There is," Gordon writes, "a significant overlap between Rosenzweig and Heidegger on the question of what kind of ultimacy remains available within the confines of human experience once the

traditional theological model of redemption is abandoned." The title of Gordon's book is thus somewhat misleading; for the most part, Gordon is content to use Heidegger as a lens through which to see what Rosenzweig is up to in *The Star*. But towards the end of the book, Gordon turns to the question of the origins of Heidegger's thought and turns the tables on Heidegger himself.

If Rosenzweig's is truly a Jewish philosophy, grounded in revelation, then perhaps it casts its light back upon Heidegger. Gordon teases us with "the startling possibility that Heidegger's philosophy itself might somehow derive from Judaism." Through the encounter with Rosenzweig's theism, Gordon hears in the normative language that Heidegger deploys to describe the stance of authenticity a theological remainder: "The concept of authenticity in Heidegger's philosophy was a religious residue, a gesture of redemption making its belated appearance in the light of a never-completed disenchantment." Gordon's text, which began with the moral discomfort of the relationship of Rosenzweig and Heidegger, thus ends with the moral discomfort of Heidegger as crypto-theist, whose philosophy may

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have been unconsciously drawn from the sources of Judaism. Given this audacious claim, one wishes that Gordon had spent some more time detailing what we might make of it, and what its implications might be for a Jewish reception of Heidegger, or a future Jewish philosophy.

Rosenzweig's daring reconsideration of the task of philosophy and his creative refashioning of theological themes was matched by a refusal to think of the political as a necessary and meaningful realm of human life and endeavor. Neither in *The Star* nor in his subsequent writings could he develop a notion of the purpose of politics as the drive for the establishment of a just or decent regime. Nor did he understand Jewish law as being related at all to political life, as the constitution of a theocratic regime, or as the basis of ethical life. Rosenzweig's vision of an "inner-worldly redemption" left him outside of or indifferent to history; it provided an escape from such mundane matters, content to deputize the Church with the task of work in the world. Here, too, Gordon observes a resemblance with Heidegger:

Paradoxically, one of the deeper "political" similarities between Rosenzweig and Heidegger is that they were both profoundly inept at thinking intelligently about politics. Neither one displayed any true dedication

when it came to ruminating upon the real problems of public and political life; and neither showed any real aptitude for interpreting the various social issues of the day. Heidegger's crude understanding of National Socialism is a case in point. Rosenzweig's belief that Jewish life happens elsewhere than politics displays a similar inaptitude.

Although today there are those who find Rosenzweig's celebration of Jewish powerlessness attractive in the face of the burdens of Jewish power, one does not have to be a committed political Zionist to find Rosenzweig's position profoundly troubling. Still others have tried to find in his later writings and correspondence a softening of his position regarding Jewish settlement in Palestine. It is clear, however, that his interpretation of *Judensein* precludes the fashioning of a Jewish state and the assumption of political responsibility. Rosenzweig may have been brought to this position by his own political disillusionments and experience of war. But it is a position that is not available to us. Political power demands political wisdom and responsibility, virtues that contemporary Jews should nurture rather than devalue.

Rosenzweig found in Judaism the possibility of delight in anticipation of eternity. But there was a price to be paid—the denial of the present.

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After all that has happened in the last century, it seems irresponsible today for the modern Jew to revert to the benign eternity of the Synagogue and the four cubits of *halacha*, without regard to either the history around us or the political-historical perspective presented in the Hebrew Bible and in philosophers like Maimonides and Spinoza. In the end, Rosenzweig's

vision of Judaism reflects a nostalgia for a traditional Jewish life. But Judaism never existed without divine law and prophecy—that is to say, political life and the quest for righteousness in the present.

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