

## Remembering Harry Jaffa

Remember Harry Jaffa as he remembered himself: Leo Strauss's best student. In nothing did Jaffa so powerfully affect the imaginations of near colleagues as in that claim of precedence. Perhaps, though, his putative rivals misunderstood the nature of his claim. Rather than the affectation of a teacher's pet, Harry Jaffa's thinking turned on his appreciation of what it meant to further Strauss's project. He believed that he had advanced that project more substantially than any other of Strauss's acolytes. What he revealed at bottom in his claim, therefore, is that he was pre-eminently an acolyte. He never affected to achieve beyond Strauss. He claimed only to realize the goal of Strauss's teaching, having experienced a conversion like unto that of Saul's in the road to Damascus.

Jaffa began with his focus on mediaeval scholasticism, writing *Thomism and Aristotelianism* in mimesis of Strauss's work on Maimonides and Plato. He discovered in the method of the "disputed question" an esotericism like unto Strauss's discernment of Maimonides's writing between the lines. Nevertheless, we justly hesitate to embrace this youthful demonstration as the justification for Jaffa's claim to be Strauss's best student. For, although he continued to return to *Thomism and Aristotelianism* in his mature years, he never explicitly connected his claim with that work. He seemed rather to urge his subsequent work as the justification.

What Jaffa seemed to mean when he described his reaction to a "physically insignificant little man with a weak voice" in terms of a conversion as dramatic as that of Saul's was that the unreflective historicism of his Yale education crumbled away like the shavings of a newly sculpted ambition. While that ambition must generically have been to become such a soul as the great soul that emerged from the "little man," in particular it seems rather to have been connected with the acquisition of a new direction or target in the search for truth. He was like the woman of Samaria who reported to her friends that she had met "a man who told me all things that ever I did." Dragging his boyhood friends, Francis Canavan and Joseph Cropsey along with him, Jaffa enlisted in the train of this messianic figure.

Key to understanding what Jaffa became under this influence is some appreciation of what he had been before. A cultural Jew of secular ambition, a patriot of moderately progressive inclinations, and an academically gifted intellect, he sought a pathway other than that of his father's restaurant business but not one that was intuitive to him. As his intellectual gifts developed he was cautioned that there was no room for a Jew in the U. S. academy. Consequently, he had no clear designs on such a course prior to coming under influences that made him heedless of the obstacles that supposedly obstructed the way. He began to envision the life of the scholar as his own life; he, too, could be an Arnold Brecht and a Harvey

Mansfield, Sr. More importantly, under the influence of Strauss, he came to imagine that as the only possibility for himself.

One of the stories that Jaffa frequently told with a glint in his eyes was the story of Joe Louis's response to criticism of his work in support of U. S. military forces during World War II. Louis was charged with ignoring the severe problems of racial injustice in the U. S. while he supported the country's foreign endeavors. Louis responded, according to Jaffa, that the U. S. "had no problems that Hitler could solve." This frequently repeated tale speaks to influences that shaped Jaffa before he came under the influence of Strauss. Just as he had applied to Yale though being advised that Jews were not admitted, he saw Louis's "defense" of the United States in the same light as his own expectations of the American dream. America had already become for him a source of salvific aspiration, social indications to the contrary notwithstanding. Jaffa, then, united his patriotism with the philosophic quest he acquired from Strauss's instruction. His conversion was not to conservatism but to philosophy as a way of life.

What made Jaffa Strauss's best student, however, was not the embrace of philosophy alone. Jaffa himself avowed that "philosophers cannot be heroes." A more particular development led to Jaffa's claim, and that has to do with the specific bearing of his own scholarship in light of Strauss's teaching. Jaffa described his discovery of the Lincoln-Douglas debates in a used book store as an epiphany, in which he realized that these deeds and speeches of statesmen could contain all the elements of a Platonic dialogue, the *Republic* in particular. With that discovery he opened a window on Strauss's teaching that was to structure all of his work thereafter. That work was to unlock the door to philosophy through reflection on politics (quite the opposite of the conventional approach of unlocking the doors of politics by reflecting on philosophy).

This is the approach that led Harry to see in the Declaration of Independence the locus classicus of philosophic insight for the modern soul. Insofar as the understanding of politics is central to political philosophy, then his claim to have unfolded a comprehensive understanding of politics is the key to understanding his teaching. As he said, everything that one needs to know about politics is contained in the expression of the Declaration that "we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted among men deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."

It hardly bears observing that it was the prosecution of this insight that created the greatest controversies in Jaffa's teaching career. But it would be helpful to recall that he had to be persuaded to produce the "Bicentennial Cerebration," having an initial reluctance that was influenced by awareness of long-standing friendships. Among the things that eventually decided the case for him was the discovery of his rival's personal efforts to recruit adherents, which hardly seemed to evidence a philosophic disposition. It was in that context that he embraced wholeheartedly Aristotle's preference of truth above Socrates as his own watchword.

Where Jaffa stood on the more abstruse questions of Strauss and Straussianism will perhaps require the immense labors of scholars- to-come to unfold. It would be hard to conceive of Jaffa being subjected, à la Strauss, to lengthy debates over whether he were an atheist. While a Yale undergraduate Jaffa spent a year in an extra-curricular Bible study, which subtended a particular bent toward biblical application in his work. If he were an atheist, he were an atheist with a God (as are even the fallen angels), not an atheist without God; for he was never victim to the intellectual slovenliness that produces atheism without God, than which nothing could more unsuitably be attributed to Harry Victor Jaffa.

W. B. Allen  
Havre de Grace, MD