Mr. Erwin A. Glikes
President and Publisher
Basic Books, Inc.
10 East 53d Street
New York, New York 10022

Dear Mr. Glikes:

To the best of my knowledge, Emil Fackenheim is among American Jews the one best equipped by virtue of his devoutness and his knowledge to pave the way for future Jewish thought through encounters between Judaism and modern philosophy. The Judaism which he courageously defends is traditional, rabbinical, non-mystical Judaism as authoritatively interpreted in the most profound Midrashim: before the tribunal of that Judaism modern philosophy must make good its claim that it has done or can do justice to Judaism, for it has hardly ever seriously tried to do so, although it always laid claim to universalism, to universal justice.

Fackenheim calls his work “A Preface to Future Jewish Thought”: the time has not yet come for what one might call a new Jewish philosophy. Maimonides is indeed the greatest Jewish philosopher, yet his way is closed to Fackenheim for the simple reason that Fackenheim cannot accept, as Maimonides could, a divine presence as a publically verifiable phenomenon. In simplistic terms: the historical consciousness demands a radical revision of traditional theology; in somewhat more precise terms, Jewish thought after Auschwitz and the birth of the state of Israel can never be the same as it was before these shattering events.

Fackenheim assigns the highest place among modern philosophers, very understandable, to Hegel—very understandingly given Hegel’s intellectual greatness, spiritual freedom, and nobility of character. He discusses also quite a few writers of a lower rank. The contemporary thinker who attracts and repels him most is, not surprisingly, Heidegger. No word beyond what Fackenheim says need or can be said about Heidegger’s siding with Hitler. But one cannot hold it against Heidegger as Fackenheim does that Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* is still silent on “das Volk”: in that work Heidegger was still on his way from Reason to Language. Furthermore, however nauseating Heidegger’s conduct in 1933 was, we must not overlook the fact that both the young and the old Heidegger
remind one of an altar-boy who, without the slightest qualms, piously, if perhaps not altogether unhypocritically, officiates at an auto-da-fé. This is not the place to discuss whether this phenomenon would become more intelligible by the admission that there are demons, especially before the question “What is a demon?” has received a satisfactory answer.

Yours sincerely,
Leo Strauss

What might at first glance seem like a routine or trivial piece of academic correspondence, may in fact shed important light on a little-known connection between two major 20th century Jewish thinkers, Leo Strauss (1899–1973) and Emil L. Fackenheim (1916–2003). By this, I refer to the only known letter of recommendation (supra) that was written in 1973 by Strauss on behalf of Fackenheim. Though it is not evident who solicited the letter (whether it was Fackenheim or the publisher), Strauss wrote it in order to assist Fackenheim in getting a manuscript of his considered for publication as a book. But to begin with the beginning: what preceded the assistance that Strauss rendered to Fackenheim? Indeed, it is reasonable to ask further: how much was this help the reflection and result of a philosophic, and not merely a personal, connection between Strauss and Fackenheim?

I shall not set it as my task to trace in detail the history of their connection (which will some day have to be written), although some matters cannot help but arise in the course of my discussion. While he still lived in Germany, Fackenheim retrospectively called Strauss a mentor based on what he had learned from his books, and in the subsequent years of his North

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1 I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to Dr. Joseph Cropsey of the University of Chicago, administrator of the Literary Estate of Leo Strauss, with whose formal permission the letter is reprinted in full as an introduction to the present essay. I would also like to acknowledge my gratitude to Dr. Benjamin Pollock, who discovered the original photocopy of the letter among the papers of Emil L. Fackenheim in Jerusalem, and who showed me a copy of it while he was Wolfe Fellow at the University of Toronto in 2004–2005. He produced it at a most fortuitous moment, just as I was discussing with him my thinking on whether Fackenheim had consciously approached the idea of the Holocaust as a “demonic,” “diabolical,” or “satanic” revelation. I am currently finishing a lengthier discussion of this topic in book-form that, I hope, will appear in print in the next little while.

2 Thus far, two essays have already been written on the relations between Leo Strauss and Emil L. Fackenheim: Solomon Goldberg, “The Holocaust and the Foundations of Future Philosophy: Fackenheim and Strauss”; and Catherine Zuckert, “Fackenheim and Strauss.” They will both appear in a forthcoming volume edited by Michael L. Morgan and Benjamin Pollock, The Philosopher as Witness: Fackenheim and Responses to the Holocaust.