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The Return of the Theological-Political in Democracy and the Rediscovery of Biblical Politics



Abstract: The Spinozist moment was a turning point for democratic theory. It reduced the biblical heritage of political philosophy to mere theology and thus founded the “autonomy of politics” so brilliantly theorized by Rousseau in his ‘Social Contract.’ Yet Spinoza and Rousseau could not found their system without reintroducing (an immanent or secularized) transcendence to politics, such that a kind of reenchantment, in the form of civil and political religions, has occurred in modern politics. These are crucial matters to consider today, as this transcendence so crucial to the foundations of democracy is collapsing. To confront this problem, one might consider that Spinoza theoretically founded democracy by expelling the biblical, and its rediscovery today might help us think through the present crisis.

I.

Biblical thought has been detached from philosophical reflection and modern politics from the Enlightenment through today, for the very same reason it might once again become topical. The inaugural act of its exclusion was the publication of Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise (TTP)*, which ended an era of European interest in Jewish sources for political thought, rendering such sources “religious” and, as such, philosophically useless. This “Spinozist moment” was a turning point for democratic theory: it laid the foundations of political modernity and launched the autonomy of the political sphere and its emancipation from religion.¹

¹ For an analysis of this process, see my *La demeure oubliée. Genèse religieuse du politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996 [1984]), translated into Italian under the title *Alle radici della modernità, genesi religiosa del politico* (Genova: ECIG, 1999).

A fascinating aspect of the political thought of Spinoza's milieu, and indeed of the *TTP* itself, is that its "raw materials"—its ancient sources and philosophical precedents—were to be found in the Hebrew Bible and the politics of the Hebrews. This is explained by the fact that the Mosaic state was at the center of political philosophy debates in the seventeenth century, but in Spinoza's work it is also, and above all, part of the paradoxical nature of his arguments.

In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, the Mosaic state is glorified for its perfection long before it is condemned on account of its irremediable corruption.² Spinoza derived his argument for the corruption of the once-ideal model from his judgment that the Jewish people, in its theological-political moment, was "all uncultivated and sunk in a wretched slavery."³

The same trajectory—from the reverence of an Israelite-Jewish model to its theologicalization and subsequent rejection—can be found in Spinoza's own literary project: he ended his philosophical life with the publication of a "political treatise," notably omitting the "theological" and defining democracy as follows:

A body politic of this kind is called a Democracy, which may be defined as a society which wields all its power as a whole. The sovereign power is not restrained by any laws, but everyone is bound to obey it in all things; such is the state of things implied when men either tacitly or expressly handed over to it all their power of self-defense, or in other words, all their right.⁴

Taken together, Spinoza's works can be found to have demolished not only the "theological-political," but the value of the biblical heritage and the political status of the Jewish people for political philosophy, reducing Judaism and its sources to mere religion.

² What fascinates Spinoza in this model is the sovereignty granted to the state by religion to admonish the society to perpetual obedience: "But with regard to the ceremonial observances which were ordained in the Old Testament for the Hebrews only, and were so adapted to their state that they could for the most part only be observed by the society as a whole and not by each individual, it is evident that they formed no part of the divine law, and had nothing to do with blessedness and virtue, but had reference only to the election of the Hebrews, that is [as I have shown in Chap. II.], to their temporal bodily happiness and the tranquility of their kingdom, and that therefore they were only valid while that kingdom lasted." *TTP*, 5:2. Translation from Bruder's 1843 Latin text by R.H.M. Elwes (1883).

³ *TTP*, 5:52: "People of a coarse complexion." Unable to assume the liberty of interpreting the texts, the Hebrews gave Moses the power to turn the republic—with the Levitical clergy continuing Moses' task—into a kind of theocratic monarchy, paving the path to confusion between the judiciary and executive fields.

⁴ *TTP*, 16:46.

At stake, from Spinoza's perspective, was the autonomy of the state. Heteronomy was rejected in every form, whether it was taken to imply that the destiny of the state relies on a religious tradition or on a heritage of the past. Modernity began by making a clean sweep, etching on a *tabula rasa*. The Cartesian cogito, its first philosophical moment, exercised radical doubt and challenged any heritage of the ancients, all customs, any preconceived notion, and any transcendent order. It required that all things ride solely on reason and subjective judgment. Following in Spinoza's footsteps, later Enlightenment thinkers would found the need to rethink reality from its mostly invented origins.

From the perspective of the modern, autonomous state that founded itself and its own laws, it is possible to understand the underlying statement of purpose in the work that might be seen alongside Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* as the other flagship book of democracy—Jean Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract*: “Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.”⁵

Rousseau's objective was “to find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before.”⁶ From this tautological perspective, we can see that democracy was predicated on something immanent; its sovereign power was to be an inherent part of it, and it could not be otherwise.

Yet two centuries of democratic history have invalidated these Rousseauian foundations and revealed a chasm between the principles of democratic ethics and the ethic—in the Weberian sense⁷—of democracy as it has developed over the course of history. Indeed, political modernity has seen the reconstitution of the unforeseen “immanent transcendences” that escaped its control. The concept of immanent transcendence is paradoxical. It was the sociologist Emile Durkheim who forged this notion,

⁵ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract, or Principles of Political Rights*, trans. G.D.H. Cole (London: J.M. Dent, 1923 [1762]), 1:6.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ The meaning of “ethic” here is closer to “ethos” than the usual definition of “ethic.” Ethos defines the behavior coming from an ethic but not necessarily in accordance with its principles. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner, 1904).

extending the domain of the sacred/religious to a variety of immanent/secular phenomena.⁸

In modern politics, a kind of reenchantment has occurred. I see three forms of this: nationalism, civic or patriotic religions, and political religions (Raymond Aron's term, coined to describe the great political ideologies).⁹ This reenchantment has given rise to important sociological and historical studies in the area of what has been called "civil religion," a term attributed to American sociologist Robert Bellah, though it would be more correctly attributed to Rousseau's *Social Contract*.¹⁰ Until Bellah, this phenomenon was largely ignored in political and philosophical reflections, though not so in sociological studies, where it was of interest to those such as Eric Vogelin, who worked in the traditions of Durkheim and Weber.

What does the rise of political religions imply, if not that transcendence and religiosity (or the religious spirit) did *not* disappear at the onset of modernity and Enlightenment? Indeed, this phenomenon cannot be considered an accident or an exception. Its persistence and recurrence show that it belongs intrinsically to democracy and to modernity more generally. This means that the theological-political did not disappear and was not curtailed; rather, it surreptitiously reconstructed itself, whether unconsciously or by logical necessity.

II.

I claim here that there is an intrinsic connection between the theological-religious and the modern-political, though the normative discourses of these realms appear to contradict one another. Whereas the latter favors autonomy and the former heteronomy, and the latter understands its origins as self-foundation and the former owes its existence to an exterior sovereign (God), nonetheless, both rely objectively on transcendence. The modern-political may indeed refuse to recognize this reliance, but it was written into the foundations of democracy from its

⁸ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Swain (New York: Collier, 1961 [1912]). "Rites are means by which the social group reaffirms itself periodically" (p. 62). "Men who feel themselves united, partially by bonds of blood but still more a community of interest and tradition, assemble and become conscious of their moral unity. They are led to represent this unity" (p. 432).

⁹ Raymond Aron, *L'âge des empires et l'avenir de la France* (Paris: Editions Défense de la France, 1946): "je propose d'appeler religions séculières les doctrines qui prennent dans les âmes de nos contemporains la place de la foi évanouie et situent ici bas, dans le lointain de l'avenir, sous la forme d'un ordre social à créer le salut de l'humanité" (p. 288).

¹⁰ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96:1 (Winter 1967), pp. 1-21.

inaugural moment, as recounted in the two flagship works mentioned above, Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* and Rousseau's *Social Contract*. These works determined, however unexpectedly, the need for religion—or religion under the guidance of the state—to allow the smooth running of democracy.

Spinoza finds that sovereigns “are as much bound by the divine law as subjects: whereas we have asserted that they retain their natural rights, and may do whatever they like.”¹¹

Those who live in a country where the Christian religion is forbidden, are bound to abstain from such rites.¹²

Therefore it is no less than undutiful for a man to act contrary to his country's laws, for if the practice became universal the ruin of states would necessarily follow.¹³

For if they had wished to retain any right for themselves, they ought to have taken precautions for its defense and preservation; as they have not done so, and indeed could not have done so without dividing and consequently ruining the state, they placed themselves absolutely at the mercy of the sovereign power; and, therefore, having acted (as we have shown) as reason and necessity demanded, they are obliged to fulfill the commands of the sovereign power, however absurd these may be, else they will be public enemies, and will act against reason, which urges the preservation of the state as a primary duty. For reason bids us choose the least of two evils.¹⁴

In Rousseau's writings this is even clearer, since in *The Social Contract*, a “civil religion” is instituted specifically to educate citizens to obey the laws that they themselves—as constituents of the sovereign—legislate. “How can a blind multitude, which often does not know what it wills, because it rarely knows what is good for it, carry out for itself so great and difficult an enterprise as a system of legislation?... It would take gods to give men laws.”¹⁵

Rousseau realized that the autonomy he advocated had to originate outside the sovereign, and, as such, he recognized the need “to have recourse to an authority of a *different order* capable of constraining without violence and persuading without convincing.”¹⁶

¹¹ *TTP*, 16:99.

¹² *TTP*, 5:61.

¹³ *TTP*, 20:27.

¹⁴ *TTP*, 16:48.

¹⁵ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, II:6.

¹⁶ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, II:7. Emphasis added.

This is what happened, he acknowledges, throughout history when recourse was made to a mythical tale introducing a legislator giving laws in order to establish their authority.

This is what has, in all ages, compelled the fathers of nations to have recourse to divine intervention and credit the gods with their own wisdom, in order that the peoples, submitting to the laws of the State as to those of nature, and recognizing the same power in the formation of the city as in that of man, might obey freely, and bear with docility the yoke of the public happiness.¹⁷

In the deleted chapter of *The Social Contract* (“The General Society of the Human Race”),¹⁸ Rousseau acknowledged the incapacity of the general will to produce this transcendence:

It is false to assert that, in the state of independence, reason leads us to contribute to the common good through a consideration of our own interests. Far from being allied, private interest and the common good are mutually exclusive in the natural order.... The proof that enlightened and independent man would have reasoned in this way [in defense of his private interests] is that this is precisely how any sovereign society reasons when it is accountable for its conduct to no one but itself.... That the general will is, in each individual, a pure act of the understanding which reasons, when the passions are silent, about what a man can ask of his fellows and what his fellows have the right to ask of him. But where is the man who can thus separate himself... to impose on himself duties whose relation with his own individual constitution he cannot see?¹⁹

With his statement regarding the need for a mythical legislator to institute the law, Rousseau clearly had recourse to transcendence. It was quite clear to him that this myth or tale must exist outside reason—outside autonomy—and that the legislator must have a role outside the sovereign. This legislator

occupies in every respect an extraordinary position in the State. If he should do so by reason of his genius, he does so no less by reason of his office, which is neither magistracy, nor Sovereignty. This office, which sets up the Republic, nowhere enters into its

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ The Geneva manuscript of *The Social Contract* contains a chapter (I:2) that Rousseau deleted from his final version. It provided an interesting bridge between *The Second Discourse* and *The Social Contract*.

¹⁹ Ibid.

constitution; it is an individual and superior function, which has nothing in common with human empire.²⁰

But Rousseau went further than to set up a mythical legislator; he also invoked a “civil religion.” To do his duty and devote himself not only to private interests but to the public good, the citizen needed to love his duty. For Rousseau, only religion could make him love it:²¹

Now, it matters very much to the community that each citizen should have a religion. That will make him love his duty; but the dogmas of that religion concern the State and its members only so far as they have reference to morality and to the duties which he who professes them is bound to do to others.... There is therefore a purely civil profession of faith of which the Sovereign should fix the articles, not exactly as religious dogmas, but as social sentiments without which a man cannot be a good citizen or a faithful subject.²²

III.

The civil and political religions²³ that took over modern democratic states produced spillover effects undreamt of by either Spinoza or Rousseau. Politics was reenchanting, and rationality was lost (except when the rational could be employed in the service of the irrational). The phenomenon of totalitarianism was the most powerful manifestation of this—and the most monstrous; it was predicated upon general will escaping reason, and encompassing the human condition in politics. In all its variants, totalitarianism deified immanent entities, from the cult of the leader to the cult of the nation, making a religion out of politics itself. It politicized humanity/the human condition.

²⁰ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, II:7.

²¹ Similarly, Spinoza wrote (*TTP*, 19): “We all know what weight spiritual right and authority carries in the popular mind: how everyone hangs on the lips, as it were, of those who possess it. We may even say that those who wield such authority have the most complete sway over the popular mind. Whosoever, therefore, wishes to take this right away from the sovereign power, is desirous of dividing the dominion; the divine right, or the right of control over spiritual matters, depends absolutely on the decree of the sovereign, who is its legitimate interpreter and champion.... Therefore the true ministers of God’s word are those who teach piety to the people in obedience to the authority of the sovereign rulers by whose decree it has been brought into conformity with the public welfare.”

²² Rousseau, *Social Contract*, II:8.

²³ It is customary to differentiate between “civil religion,” the patriotic cult of the democratic nation state, and “political religion,” which refers to the mass political ideologies of the twentieth century.

Max Weber's analysis, somewhat ironically, shed light on this reenchantment of politics. According to Weber, individuals facing crises (understood as gaps between expectations and reality) welcome norms that propose to give meaning to their lives, and allow such norms to be imposed on them. The process by which such individuals then come to live by these imposed norms, and indeed organize each of their actions with reference to the imposed normative system, which provides a comprehensive and coherent order, is termed "rationalization." The normative orders themselves, though they may be coherent and systematic, are often far from rational. They may be religious or otherwise. Weber pointed to the fact that this "rationalization," and the existence of a normative system grounding it (Protestantism), served as a fundamental condition for the institution of capitalism, the height of rational organization of life.

The problem with Weber's understanding recounted here is that he found that behaviors were increasingly rationalized with reference to values (as values underlie norms), but these values had no rational foundation. This allows us to understand why Weber sought the origin of modernity in monotheism (Jewish and Protestant above all). For him, the rationality of ends (*Zweckrationalität*) was purely formal and instrumental. Rationalization was with reference to values (*Wertrationalität*), which in themselves have no rational basis but depend on a pure option and personal decision. Weber's theory of charismatic authority merely confirmed this perspective, emphasizing the most powerful and unexpected principle of legitimacy in the democratic era. Indeed, the Weberian conception merely acknowledged, in a different way, what Rousseau knew, Spinoza sensed, and Nietzsche developed disproportionately.

World War II served as a turning point for this understanding of political history. When the enchantment of reason and politics was confronted, and the catastrophes of World War II were taken into account, the idea of progress was weakened, and the prevailing sentiment came to be that the mistakes of modernity were not accidents but expressions of congenital failures in modern politics. It was at this turning point that the problem of the foundations of democracy was posed in new terms. The abyss created by the Holocaust revealed these foundations in all their fragility.

The crisis of democracy has continued to intensify. The counterculture of the 1970s undermined democracy's most fundamental values, including obligation toward the law and authority in general. A few years later, it was the idea of sovereignty that was contested, and the nation was deconstructed to the point of shattering any collective identity. Today, it is the city that is in the hot seat in the face of globalization. As regards the individual, the confusion of genders has ruined the idea of the subject.

It is this picture that is reflected by the new dominant ideology, post-modernism. Its theory of the “narrative” reflects a naïve belief that reality is best reduced to a story or a multiplicity of stories, but this does little more than rediscover, loosely and weakly, Rousseau’s founding myth of the “legislator,” only this time denying it any transcendence. The idea of immanent transcendence has lost its charm. From this point of view, the doctrine of postmodernism appears as the scarcely audible swan song of a modernity that is drawing to an end.

It is in this context that the theological-political question naturally recovers its importance.

Four crucial questions must be addressed today, in the age that has seen the end of civil and political religions: What is the basis for democratic values? What is the reference point for the principle of obligation? What is the identity of the political community? And what are the limits of politics?

It is in the global context in which these questions are situated that the model of biblical politics is being rediscovered in the twenty-first century. This step must be clarified; of interest is not only the way Jews translate global problems of democratic culture into the terms of their own culture, nor how the renewal of Jewish sovereignty in the State of Israel might contribute to political questions and the raising of Jewish political consciousness. Perhaps most interesting, rather, is the fact that the seventeenth-century question of the Mosaic state, dismissed by Spinoza and Rousseau, is reappearing on the surface of the Earth like a stream of lava springing from a hardened crust, with the weakening of the democratic framework. In some way, the planetary problem represented by Zionism and the State of Israel is merely a distant sociological consequence of this metaphysical and political earthquake. Beyond the symptom of this tectonic evolution of modern civilization, there is the question of how to position in relation to this model. What can our secularized culture expect to gain from it? How should the biblical text be read, considering our concerns? This will be, I am certain, one of the most important missions of Jewish philosophy and perhaps of political philosophy in this century, the way by which the destiny of Jewish thought meets with the destiny of political philosophy in this new era.

Below I will outline some parameters of the biblical model that might answer the four questions I claim must be addressed. While I speak of a biblical “model,” it is not at all evident that such a model exists. Before it can be considered for politics, it must be constructed, and this requires interpretative and creative readings. To deal with Hebraic politics is not to return to the past but to undertake a creative invention. The bibliography is to be produced and written. I intend from this perspective to

outline a model, that is to say, a purely intellectual perspective that facilitates thinking.

3.1 *The Foundations of the Political*

The strongest political idea in the Hebrew Bible, arguably, is that of a political foundation without representation or image. The text of Deuteronomy 29:12–14 is very significant in this respect:

To the end that he may establish you this day as his people and be your God... I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and *those who are not with us here this day*.²⁴

This last phrase, “those who are not with us,” not only represents future generations or future converts; it signifies an intrinsic, structural, and permanent absence. The kingdom of Israel is based on a void as regards representation. We might play on Benedict Anderson’s famous expression and say that the Jewish people is an “unimagined community.”²⁵ At the heart of the city, in its very center, there is a symbolic hole that escapes designation or definition.

3.2 *The Limits of Politics*

This void is, in fact, the place of God. Since the ban on representation poses a limit on the relationship between him and man, God is constantly absent in his social presence. Since God cannot be represented, no individual party can appropriate him.

This general principle is well established right from the story of creation: God suspends his action and withdraws on the sixth day, once man has been created, once the history of man has commenced. The kingdom of heaven thus manifests its presence in the kingdom of Israel by the withdrawal of the presence that it represents at the very center of power, like the cloud at the center of Israel’s camp at Sinai. This absence places a limit on politics; there remains a domain that escapes its control.

²⁴ Emphasis added.

²⁵ Bernard Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991).

3.3 *Rational Heteronomy*

This void, however, is not doomed to indeterminacy or nothingness. There is a name—the Tetragrammaton—but it is not pronounced. It is referred to as a person, so the relationship is, for the members of the collectivity, one that singles out a non-anonymous entity on the pretext of universalism and equality. At the heart of the city, therefore, resides what is outside it. It is possible to make person-to-person contact with it, which is not the same as contacting the “cold monster,” machine, or Leviathan of the state. The feeling of obligation originates in this access.

This paradoxical presence is neither mysterious nor magical, however. It appears through a biblical text that can be interpreted and rationalized. There is no founding myth, as its textuality demystifies it. That there is no myth is also shown by the fact that the covenant is not concluded once and for all, but each generation must renew it according to an interpretation suited to its time. Each generation must thus reinvent the founding moment. An example of this in the Bible itself is the renewal of the covenant by Joshua at Shechem.

In the same way, the covenant is prone to crises. These are always viewed with respect to the covenantal text and faithfulness to its principles. The history of the collectivity therefore depends not upon mystery or chance but upon a formal, thinkable, and expressible rationality.

3.4 *Consent*

The void at the center of the city is not terrifying; it is a pretext for a covenant between two partners. God, who is absent, infinite, and beyond representation, is constituted as an ally of the collectivity and of each of its members.

The covenant that founds this order requires the consent of two partners, including that of the weakest and hence most unlikely partner, man. Exodus 6:2–9 depicts God’s asking for Israel’s agreement to renew the covenant of the patriarchs, an agreement that the nation initially withholds “for impatience of spirit, and for cruel bondage.”

This covenant is both vertical—between Israel and God—and horizontal, between the people of Israel. At its heart lies the presence of the divine partner, although we cannot see or apprehend him. This is another way of saying “the void at the heart of the city.” This “third party,” outside the inter-individual and global relationship, stands as a person, the source of the moral imperative addressed to each person individually.

3.5 *The Collective Identity*

This set of mechanisms affects how the political community is defined. It is not predicated merely upon itself, nor is its definition circular, because of the place of “the absent one” at its center. This is concretely expressed by the spatial arrangement of the tribes around the Tabernacle in Numbers 1:1–4. In this case, the center of the space is forbidden to the collectivity.

The effect of this presence is that when the collective identifies itself, it does so not only with reference to itself, but also with reference to something outside itself. The importance of that which is “other” for communal identity has many expressions in the biblical text. The *ger* (stranger) and his role in the definition of collective identity is one example that alone prevents any fusion of individuals into a shapeless and anonymous mass.²⁶

The necessary presence of the “other” in the community’s self-definition complicates attempts at narcissistic exaltation of the people. The main aim of the biblical narrative of the people of Israel is to avoid closure, to bypass its total exposure outside. The best example of this idea is the quasi prohibition of census and its dangerousness.²⁷

3.6 *The Function of the Levites*

The political system that derives from all these mechanisms seems to me governed by what I call the Levitical function.²⁸

The most important problem with transcendence in politics is the incidence of priesthood. Priesthood is generally accompanied by an order that is devoted to it and which, on its behalf, assumes power. This is why Spinoza finally dismissed the Mosaic state as a model of political constitution: the Hebrews, by renouncing their freedom to interpret, relinquished this right in favor of an intermediary class, the Levitical tribe, which Spinoza considered as clergy.

The status of the Levitical tribe, however, differed radically from Spinoza’s presentation of it. The Levitical mechanism actually implemented a model of sociopolitical management of transcendence that attempted (without always succeeding) to bypass these inevitable pitfalls.

²⁶ “You are aliens and visitors with me [God]” (Leviticus 25:23).

²⁷ Note the plague that King David’s census provoked (II Samuel 1–16).

²⁸ See Shmuel Trigano, *Philosophy of the Law*, forthcoming from Shalem Press.

There is absolutely no doubt that the Levites constituted a functional class in addition to a tribe. However, the morphological characteristics of their status and their attributions show that while they helped to found and institute the political community, they were radically removed from power and sovereignty.

The status of the Levitical tribe marks a morphological separation from and indeed a rupturing of Hebrew society, transcending the duodecimal tribal sharing: “Thus shall you separate the Levites from among [*toch*] the children of Israel, and the Levites shall be mine [God’s].”²⁹ Logically, the Levites were absent from the count of the children of Israel, and their census was conducted separately from the rest of the tribes.³⁰ The Levites as a tribe were deprived of any agricultural property³¹ and possessed only cities,³² as if to ascribe a principle of exile or “nomadism” to the settling of the people of Israel in the land of Canaan. This principle was axial, since it was the Levites who were assigned to care for the Sanctuary and the Torah,³³ and God is defined as “the portion” of the Levite.³⁴

This separation was itself subject to internal separation of a professional type: the priestly family (Kohanim) was separated from the rest of the Levites to accomplish the sacrifice.³⁵ Hence, the separation of the Levites from the rest of the tribes was endowed with a dynamic, mobile, and non-static impact.

The Levitical status fit into a very complex system of gifts and counter-gifts. The Levites were “given, given” to God by Israel in Numbers 8:17, and indeed, “instead of all... the firstborn... and I have taken the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the children of Israel... to effect *kapara*³⁶ for the children of Israel.”³⁷

²⁹ Numbers 8:14.

³⁰ Numbers 1:47–49. The census of the tribes was possible only indirectly: by the count of the half shekel paid by every Hebrew or accompanied by the offering of a sacrifice.

³¹ Deuteronomy 18:2.

³² Numbers 35:2.

³³ Deuteronomy 33:9–10.

³⁴ Numbers 18:20.

³⁵ Numbers 8:16–19.

³⁶ In standard translations, this term is rendered “atonement,” but this is no atonement in any usual sense, as no sin precedes it. I suggest that *kapara* includes a component of “covering” (that is, hiding, or disappearing from vision), not only ritually but in its biblical connotations. See Genesis 6:14, “Make yourself an ark... and pitch (*vechafarta*) it outside and inside with pitch....”

³⁷ Numbers 8:16–19.

This gift was instituted through the prescription of the tithe paid by the tribes,³⁸ a part of which was given to the Levitical priests by the Levites, so that not all the land would be the property of the tribes. This incomplete property relation of the tribes to the land was reinforced by the year of fallow release and the year of the Jubilee. The aim of perpetuating such a limited relationship was to occasionally suspend the relationship to the earth and thus the process of rooting, as if all the tribes became Levites every seven years.

IV.

Here we have an entire system that could be defined as the “Levitical constitution” of the people of Israel (resting on the Sabbath, in the year of fallow,³⁹ and in the year of the Jubilee).⁴⁰ This economic system of gifts, as well as the Levitical status, aimed indirectly at keeping the existence of a political center, left vacant, separated from the environment. We can see how these numerous devices for identifying the people of Israel defined the nature of the political. What was at stake in the Hebrew polity was the problem of wholeness. It is also possible to view the Levites’ status as “given, given,” or *kapara* (covered, hidden), as reflecting this, as the people of Israel were never fully whole; part of them was “given,” or covered. The political realm was, in fact, empty. I suggest viewing the technical term that designates this “political center” in the terms expressing the “inside”—*toch* and *kerev*. My method is to give the biblical terms their meaningful and heavy sense.

“You shall separate the Levites from the *toch* of the children of Israel; and the Levites shall be mine.”⁴¹ Here, with *toch*, we have the definition of the political center of this collectivity. This definition is confirmed by “Thou shall have no inheritance in their... *toch*,”⁴² since property refers to a political order. But, as we can see, this “center” is born from the separation of the Levites from the people of Israel; it is the remnant of their withdrawal, and their absence bears it.

The position the Levites are left with, then, could be considered a second center, with a religious vocation. This center is defined as *kerev* (among). “And they shall have no inheritance among (*kerev*) their brethren.”⁴³

³⁸ Numbers 35:2; Leviticus 27:30–32; Deuteronomy 14:28–29.

³⁹ Leviticus 23:9–10.

⁴⁰ Leviticus 25:8.

⁴¹ Numbers 8:14.

⁴² Numbers 18:20.

⁴³ Deuteronomy 18:2.

This “*kerev*” is paradoxical. It draws closer (*kirva* is defined as “to draw close”), but this closeness is empty, since it is implemented by the sacrifice, the “*korban*” (which in Hebrew refers to *kerev*, “closeness”). Through their withdrawal, the Levites become this center—where they perform their religious function. Therefore, we should understand “And you shall present [“*hikravta*,” which can be read as “you will sacrifice”] the Levites before the tent of meeting.”⁴⁴ It is in the *kerev* that the *kapara* of the children of Israel is achieved, through the *korban*, the “sacrifice” in which the priests officiate.

The *toch* is a political center and is leaning on the *kerev*, the religious center. The *kahal* is the identity born of their meeting:

And you shall present [bring closer/*hikravta*] the Levites before the tent of meeting; and you shall assemble [*kahal*] the whole congregation [*eda*] of the children of Israel.⁴⁵

And they shall be unto you for the calling of the congregation [*eda*] and for causing the camps to set forward. And when they shall blow with them, all the congregation shall gather themselves unto you at the door of the tent of meeting.⁴⁶

This confers an original and paradoxical meaning on the political impact of the collective identity of Israel thus formed; it is defined by the absence it shelters—not in a positive manner, but with negative attributes, just as Maimonides defines the divine attributes.

This interpretation does not mean that Israel’s collective identity lacks sovereignty and power. Rather, through his alliance with the people, the God who cannot be represented dwells among the collectivity of Israel. This is the main reason for the whole system we have examined: “And I will dwell among [*toch*] the children of Israel... [having] brought them forth out of the land of Egypt.”⁴⁷

The divine presence is hidden, absent, and it is around its vacant space that the Hebrew polity is established. This is the very principle of the Hebrew biblical polity.

Beyond Spinoza’s interpretation, then, there is another perspective on the Levitical function, which leads to totally different conclusions.

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⁴⁴ Numbers 8:9.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Exodus 29:45–46.