Abstract: How should we think about Spinoza after the 350th anniversary of his expulsion (2006)? One way is to consider this through the “dialogue” between Hermann Cohen and Leo Strauss on the occasion of an earlier commemoration. The revival of interest in Spinoza in the early part of the twentieth century was preparation for reinstating him within the fold of European philosophy and Jewish history. Strauss remained skeptical. While exonerating Spinoza from Cohen’s harsh rebukes, Strauss regarded Spinoza’s various solutions to the “Jewish question” as deeply flawed. In a series of writings from the 1920s to the 1960s, Strauss attempted to show that the problems of European Jewry could not be reduced to politics (Spinoza) or culture (Cohen) but remained a living testimony to a world characterized by the absence of redemption. The best way to remember and even honor Spinoza’s legacy today is through recognition of the permanence of the theologico-political problem.

I am in no way a Cohenian.¹

It is a blessing for us that Hermann Cohen lived and wrote.²


1. Happy Birthday

How to commemorate Spinoza, especially on the 350th anniversary of his excommunication? This is an unusual problem. In schools and universities, a student’s expulsion—at Yale, it is still called by the old-fashioned term of rustication—is usually passed over in embarrassed silence. This seems not to be the case with Spinoza. There is apparently no statute of limitations on whatever “evil opinions,” “abominable heresies,” or “awful deeds” he was supposed to have held or practiced. We are still debating it 350 years later. In point of fact, the ban or excommunication of Spinoza was really more along the lines of a school suspension. Despite the fiery language of the herem, such excommunications as practiced in his community were not as severe as the term now suggests. The permanence of Spinoza’s exile, like Socrates’ decision to drink the hemlock, was largely a matter of choice. What did he intend for it to accomplish? Did it contain an element of philosophic martyrdom? One way to begin thinking about this commemoration is to consider how other such anniversaries have been considered in the past.

The year 1932 witnessed an earlier celebration of Spinoza in recognition of the tercentennial of his birth. Throughout Europe and Palestine, events were planned to welcome Spinoza back into the fold of Jewish history. For many who were participating in these celebrations, they represented an unprecedented opportunity to right what was seen as a deep historical injustice, namely, the excommunication of Spinoza from the Sephardic community of Amsterdam and from the Jewish world more generally. The rehabilitation of Spinoza had, of course, been under way for more than a century. Beginning in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, Spinoza was canonized by the German romantics as the “God-intoxicated man,” and by the first third of the nineteenth century, he was being treated by the German Jewish community as a forerunner of the liberal, cosmopolitan “man-in-general.” Spinoza may have been seen as

---


4 The famous Panteismusstreit can be dated to 1785 with the publication of F.H. Jacobi’s *On the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Moses Mendelssohn;* this exchange has recently been translated under the title *The Spinoza Conversations Between Lessing and Jacobi,* trans. G. Vallée, J.B. Lawrence, and C.G. Chapple (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1988). For the treatment of Spinoza’s cosmopolitanism, see Emil
a heretic, but he was still a Jewish heretic, and his heresies vital steps toward the age of emancipation. Everyone—whether they admitted it or not—has been a beneficiary of his sacrifice.  

This birthday celebration had already been anticipated five years earlier, in 1927, on the 250th anniversary of Spinoza’s death. Carl Gebhardt, the leading Spinoza scholar of that era, had recently edited the four-volume *Spinoza Opera* that even today remains the standard edition of his work. Gebhardt was also the editor of a new journal, the *Chronicon Spinozanum* (The Spinoza Chronicle), intended to rehabilitate Spinoza’s philosophical status. Although not a Jew himself, Gebhardt had pioneered the investigation of the influence of such Spanish Marranos as Uriel Da Costa and Juan de Prado on the young Spinoza.  

Seen from this perspective, Spinoza’s heresies were explained by the world of the *conversos*, torn between Judaism and Christianity but fully at home in neither. The purely scholarly study of Spinoza’s thought had already begun in the Jewish world where scholars like Manuel Jöel, the rabbi of the Jewish community in Breslau, had sought out the medieval Jewish influences on Spinoza.  

This source-critical attention to the latter’s thought received its fullest expression just two years after the birthday celebration with the publication of Harry Austryn Wolfson’s magisterial two-volume study *The Philosophy of Spinoza*.  

The political rehabilitation of Spinoza in the Jewish world had already begun long before. Moses Hess, the contemporary of Marx, signed his name “a disciple of Spinoza” and had attempted to claim Spinoza as an ancestor of Zionism and socialism. Berthold Auerbach produced the first German-language translation of Spinoza’s complete works and wrote a novel that turned him into a secular saint offering redemption through a

---


7 Manuel Jöel, *Spinozas Theologisch-politischer Traktat, auf seine Quellen geprüft* (Breslau: Schletter, 1870).

But it was not until the approach of the tercentennial that this tendency reached its zenith. At the Hebrew University on top of Mount Scopus in Jerusalem, the eminent Hebraicist and historian Joseph Klausner denounced the ban on Spinoza as an historical anachronism. Spinoza may have been expelled from the Jewish community, but he did not cease to be a Jew. Far from it. Spinoza showed what it was to be a new kind of Jew. “The ban is revoked,” Klausner declared—on whose authority no one knew—and then proceeded to proclaim three times, “Baruch Spinoza, you are our brother.”

This era of good feeling came to an abrupt end exactly one year after the Spinoza tercentennial when Adolf Hitler came to power.

Into the midst of this garden party, a little-known scholar, a researcher at the Academy of Jewish Studies in Berlin and the author of a book titled *Die Religionskritik Spinozas*, lobbed a grenade. His name was Leo Strauss. On the surface, Strauss’ book was a purely scholarly investigation into the sources of what he called Spinoza’s Bible science (*Bibelwissenschaft*). The work was a product of the *Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, where Strauss had been employed since 1925. The academy, as its name implied, was dedicated to the pursuit of a scientific or scholarly study of Judaism based on careful attention to historical sources and influences. The book was dedicated to the memory of Franz Rosenzweig, one of the co-founders of the academy and the great proponent of neo-Orthodoxy, who had died the year before the work’s publication.

But Strauss’ book was far more than a piece of neutral or disinterested scholarship. While making no mention of the Spinoza renaissance then taking place, Strauss placed Spinoza’s biblical criticism within the tradition of “Epicureanism,” whose modern proponents he identified

---


as Da Costa, Isaac de la Peyrère, and Thomas Hobbes as well as later thinkers such as Hume, Holbach, Bauer, Feuerbach, Marx, and others. This classification may seem innocuous enough, but Strauss’ charge of Epicureanism was a battle cry. Epicureanism is a form of ancient religious critique most frequently associated with the Roman philosopher-poet Lucretius, whose De Rerum Natura treated the gods as inventions of the human mind created to allay the fear of death. In mishnaic Judaism, the word *epikorus*, or Epicurean, is used to refer to other religious sects, to paganism, and sometimes to heretics more generally. It is a highly charged term of abuse. From a strictly Jewish point of view, then, to charge Spinoza with Epicureanism was to put him outside the pale, to declare him *treif*. Lying behind—or just beyond—Strauss’ charge was a series of interventions that have only recently begun to receive the attention they deserve. What was going on?

2. ‘*A Humanly Incomprehensible Betrayal*’

Strauss’ incentive for entering the Spinoza debate was the work of Hermann Cohen, a man whom Strauss would later call “the center of attraction of philosophically minded Jews who were devoted to Judaism.” The name Hermann Cohen is today scarcely remembered except by specialists in the history of philosophy, but Cohen was the leading light of the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism, which dominated the intellectual landscape of Strauss’ youth. Cohen was the author of several technical treatises updating and adapting Kant’s critical philosophy, but in the last decades of his long life he increasingly addressed himself to Jewish themes and especially to the relationship between Judaism and

---


14 See *Mishna*, Sanhedrin 10:1: “All Israel has a share in the world to come, as it is written: ‘And all of your people, who are righteous, will merit eternity and inherit the land [...]’ (Isaiah 60:21). And these are the people who do not merit the world to come: The ones who say there is no resurrection of the dead, and those who deny the Torah is from heaven, and Epicureans.” In a semi-ironical vein, Strauss also used a variant of the *epikorus* in referring to his own writings: on September 30, 1973 (less than a month before his death), he wrote to Gershom Scholem: “I finished an essay on *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, on the gods in Thucydidides, and on Xenophon’s *Anabasis*. Rather apiquorsic stuff but I have a feeling that the BOSS will not condemn me.” GS, vol. 3, p. 771.

Germany. Cohen's essays written during World War I on *Deutschtum und Judentum* argued that it was possible for Jews to live as Jews but still participate in the larger world of German culture, of philosophy, arts, letters, and music. There was the closest affinity between Judaism and German culture, between the people of the book and the people of Beethoven, Goethe, and Schiller. For Cohen, it was the peculiar destiny of Judaism to inhabit both these worlds, and there was no need to choose between them.

In the midst of the Spinoza revival then under way, Cohen offered his own criticism of Judaism's most famous heretic in a lengthy article titled “Spinoza über Staat und Religion, Judentum und Christentum” (1915). Cohen had excoriated Spinoza throughout his long career, but it was only in his old age that his work took on a bitter and ad hominem tone. Cohen's case against Spinoza can be stated simply: Spinoza was guilty of “a humanly incomprehensible betrayal” of Judaism. Spinoza stood condemned as a betrayer and falsifier of his own people. This for Cohen was an especially grievous sin, as it translated as a lack of fidelity. It is the concept of fidelity—loyalty to one's family, friends, and religious tradition—that is one of the crucial virtues in Cohen's ethics and that explains his deep aversion to Spinoza. Perhaps most dangerously, Cohen claimed that Spinoza had created negative stereotypes about Judaism and biblical religion that were later to influence Kant, who depended upon Spinoza's research. Spinoza thus stands accused of being the chief “prosecutor” of Judaism before a hostile Gentile world.

Spinoza's betrayal consisted, among other things, of his denigration of the prophets as ignorant men of vivid imagination whose teachings expressed their own partial and defective understandings of God. For Cohen, who treated the prophets as something like harbingers of the Kantian moral law, Spinoza's depiction of them could not but

---


appear as based on a profound misunderstanding of the monotheistic idea. Jewish monotheism, as Cohen understands it, is defined by the doctrine of care for the stranger. Cohen singled out Leviticus 9:33 ("when a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong") to demonstrate the moral universalism of biblical Judaism. It is precisely this conception of caring for the stranger or the "other" that constitutes the essence of Judaism.20

Cohen is especially indignant about Spinoza's use of a passage from Maimonides that claims that non-Jews have no place in the world to come unless they believe in the Mosaic revelation.21 Cohen denies this reading of the passage but chooses to emphasize instead of the Mosaic revelation the Noahide commandments as proof of Jewish universalism. The seven so-called laws of Noah concerning God's re-founding of humanity after the flood were elaborated by talmudic scholars as moral rules binding equally on Jews and Gentiles. These laws formed the ethical basis of our later ideas about equality, justice, and tolerance. In fact, Cohen found additional support for his view in the work of a contemporary of Spinoza's, the English natural law theorist John Selden, who wrote a book titled De jure naturali et gentium juxta disciplinam Ebraorum (Natural Law and the Gentiles According to the Hebrew Teaching) and attempted to prove the Hebraic origins of the idea of a universal moral law.22

Not only did Spinoza stand guilty of willfully misrepresenting Jewish universalism, he also profoundly distorted the original meaning of monotheism. In Spinoza's doctrine of Deus sive natura, God is associated with the causal operations of the natural world. This is the source of Spinoza's famous—or infamous—pantheism, which would have profound moral consequences for German philosophy over the next century. For Cohen, however, the identity of God and nature is inseparable from the equation of might and right.23 If God is virtually inscribed in the causal processes of nature, we have no recourse but to submit to even the most abhorrent reality. A divinized world is a recipe for tyranny insofar as it equates the existing state of affairs with the purposes of God. It was this


23 Ibid., p. 305.
Spinozistic equation of might and right that Cohen also found at work in the Hegelian doctrine of history. When Hegel declared the identity of the actual and the rational, he in effect denied that there is any basis for morality other than power. This axis of reason and history cut the ground out from any possible moral protest or revolt.24

Spinoza’s doctrine of divine immanence is virtually the opposite of Cohen’s understanding of ethical monotheism. While Spinoza stands accused of conflating the Is and the Ought, Cohen interprets the vocation of Israel in the light of Kant’s moral idealism. Cohen described this method as one of “idealization,” that is, the purification of those elements within both German and Jewish culture that betray their own highest possibilities. The critical task of monotheism thus remains to underwrite an ethical culture based on norms of universal justice and humanity that are implicit but have not been fully realized. Israel thus has a universal mission in the world, which is to “purify” or “idealize” those elements of both Deutschum and Judentum in order to make them better conform to the prophetic vision of Micah, a world where “nation shall not lift up sword against nation,” but “they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid” (Micah 4:3–4). Such a culture is necessarily “normative”—the late Steven Schwarzschild once called it “heroic”—precisely because it cannot be inferred from the existing facts or trends of history but stands to some degree in opposition to them.25

Finally, and most importantly for our purposes, Cohen’s critique of Spinoza was not without a political focus. Spinoza had interpreted Judaism as a purely national religion, a confession publica, as it were. He even suggested in the third chapter of the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus, albeit in a cool and cynical manner, that so fickle is history that Jewish sovereignty might some day be re-gained, and the Jews may benefit from God’s election a “second time” (de novo).26 Cohen refers to this passage as an example of Spinoza’s “dämonischen Ironie” for its suggestion that God chooses only those who have been politically successful, although the same passage was also underscored by readers who saw Spinoza as a forerunner of Zionism and a Jewish national state.27

Cohen was a socialist and saw the national state as a barrier to universal peace, equality, and moral progress. Messianism was, for Cohen,

26 Spinoza, TTP, ch. 5, § 55.
another term for socialism. Moses' exclamation "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets" (Numbers 11:29) was for him simply a call for the recognition of the dignity and equality of all peoples. For this reason, Cohen was passionately opposed to Zionism, because he feared it would simply re-affirm what the anti-Semites had been saying all along, namely, that Judaism was a narrow and particularistic civil creed. Even more profoundly, Cohen criticized the Zionists for their desire for happiness rather than the desire to be worthy of happiness, thus abandoning traditional notions of sin, guilt, and redemption. "These bums want to be happy (die Kerls wollen glücklich sein)," he once remarked, prompting Gershom Scholem to reply that this was the deepest thing Cohen ever said about Zionism. To be sure, Cohen realized that his ideal of a social democratic culture was not yet a matter of fact. The symbiosis of Deutschtum and Judentum was a "regulative idea" in the precise Kantian sense of the term, not an actual historical fact but an object of aspiration and moral hope. Until the messianic idea has been realized, Jews have an ethical obligation to maintain their identity and even accept the burdens of martyrdom, if only because the very future of monotheism remains at stake.

In the final analysis, Cohen's objection to Spinoza is for his infidelity. The author of the Tractatus was the first philosopher to reject the ancestral tradition of his own people and an "apostate" who preferred Christianity to Judaism. For Cohen, as stated, fidelity is the key social virtue. In his last great work, Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism, he treats fidelity as rooted in the covenant between God and Noah, Abraham, and the people Israel. Through this covenant God remembers his promises to mankind, and we remember our duties to God.


30 Cohen's acceptance of Jewish suffering along with his rejection of even the possibility of a Jewish state has made his philosophy "increasingly hard to swallow for a generation exposed to Hitler and Auschwitz." Kenneth Seeskin, "How to Read 'Religion of Reason,'" in Cohen, Religion of Reason, p. 40. For a more detailed critique, see Emil Fackenheim, "Hermann Cohen: After Fifty Years," Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture 12 (1969), pp. 3–27.

Fidelity, then, is a form of gratitude through which we recall our obligations. It is the source of our collective memory and our sense of identity. Thus, when Cohen attacked Spinoza for his lack of fidelity to Judaism, he meant not simply that Spinoza was an abettor of anti-Jewish sentiments (although this would be bad enough), but that he had somehow misunderstood the very bond that makes social justice and moral progress possible.  

3. ‘I Owe the Idea of My Work to the Critical Study of Hermann Cohen’

Strauss’ earliest intervention in the Spinoza debate began with a lengthy critique of Cohen’s interpretation of Spinoza’s *Tractatus*. Published originally in Martin Buber’s journal *Der Jude*, Strauss’ essay titled “Cohens Analyse der Bibelwissenschaft Spinozas” (1924) was devoted to attacking Cohen’s case against Spinoza. Strauss absolves Spinoza from Cohen’s charge of betrayal by arguing at length that his critique of Judaism stemmed from neither malice nor animus against Judaism but from the “objective conditions” of seventeenth-century Holland. Cohen failed to see the forces of persecution prevalent at the time of Spinoza. Strauss devotes a considerable part of his analysis to showing that Spinoza’s motives for writing the *Tractatus* can be inferred not from the biographical facts of his excommunication or from some psychological desire for revenge, but from his desire to liberate philosophy from ecclesiastical supervision.

In important respects, Strauss devotes the bulk of his article to defending Spinoza from Cohen’s blistering assault. Cohen is criticized for attributing to Spinoza motives that are either conjectural or unnecessary to the understanding of the *Tractatus*. Cohen makes much of Spinoza’s alleged hostility to the Jewish community due to the ban imposed on him by the Amsterdam synagogue. But Strauss replies that Spinoza cannot be rightly charged with reacting to the ban, because his ideas were themselves the cause of the ban. Cohen thus has the causal arrows moving in the wrong direction. The content of the *Tractatus*, if not the text, precedes the ban. Furthermore, Cohen believed that the target of Spinoza’s ire

was Judaism, whereas it was in fact revealed religion as such. Nothing Spinoza says about Judaism does not apply equally to Christianity. But most significantly, Cohen misses the point of the *Tractatus*. Spinoza’s aim was not to attack Judaism per se but “to win recognition for the neutrality of the philosopher.” It is the freedom to philosophize that he seeks above all. The critique of Scripture was secondary. “Spinoza was compelled to engage in the critique of the Bible,” Strauss writes, “by legitimate motives, whether or not he was full of hatred toward Judaism.”

Strauss also notes the political motive underlying Cohen’s critique of Spinoza. Cohen takes particular umbrage at Spinoza’s charge that the religion of Moses was intended for the establishment and preservation of the Jewish state. For Cohen, we have seen, the core of Judaism is the messianic idea by which he understands the notion of Israel’s universal mission. The distinctive mission of Judaism is to create an ethical culture of reason that Cohen associates with socialism and the idea of almost infinite moral progress. Spinoza’s claim that Judaism was a tribal religion only could not but appear as “satanic” to Cohen, whereas Strauss adds sardonically that Cohen would have regarded it as “divine” had Spinoza defined the sole purpose of Judaism as the establishment and preservation of socialism.

Strauss returned to this argument many years later in his famous lecture “Jerusalem and Athens.” At the end of that lecture, in a section entitled “On Socrates and the Prophets,” Strauss once again criticized the basis of Cohen’s ethical socialism. Cohen had argued in his essay “Das soziale Ideal bei Platon und den Propheten” that Western culture has two sources: Plato and the Hebrew prophets. He credits the author of the *Republic* with discovering the idea of rational truth, that truth is a function of reason alone. But Plato, in keeping with the aristocratic prejudices of the Greeks, regarded truth as a preserve of a minority, of the philosophers. Plato’s appeal to a city where philosophers would rule as kings was merely an expression of his anti-democratic elitism. This is why Plato needed to be supplemented by the prophets, who were the first to imagine the possibility of true moral progress. The prophets were not encumbered by Greek philosophical ideas about human nature and introduced the ideas of moral perfectibility and the dignity of all human

---

beings. It is to the prophets, above all, that we owe the idea of an ethical culture in which all human beings can participate.

Strauss was particularly critical of Cohen’s belief in moral progress and its goal of perpetual peace. The path to perpetual peace, Strauss warned, is paved by perpetual war. He notes that Cohen opposes war but makes an exception for revolution, that is, wars of liberation. He mourns the death of revolutionaries but says nothing about their victims. In short, Cohen’s faith in the triumph of the messianic idea presupposes the very Machiavellianism that he opposes in Spinoza, namely, that a good cause sanctifies any deed. In any case, Cohen’s faith in the ultimate triumph of democratic socialism could not have survived the shocks of the twentieth century. The Kantian-Cohenian faith in the moral progress of humanity has been massively contradicted by subsequent events:

Cohen’s thought belongs to the world preceding World War I. Accordingly, he had a greater faith in the power of modern Western culture to mold the fate of mankind than seems warranted now. The worst things he had experienced were the Dreyfus scandal and the pogroms instigated by czarist Russia; he did not experience Communist Russia and Hitler’s Germany…. Catastrophes and horrors of a magnitude hitherto unknown… which we have seen and have lived, were better provided for, or made intelligible, by both Plato and the prophets than by the modern belief in progress.40

The upshot of Strauss’ critique of Cohen is both to vindicate and to condemn Spinoza. On the one hand, Strauss exonerates him from the charge of acting out of pure malice, yet on the other, he does so by severing entirely the principles of Spinoza’s biblical criticism from Jewish sources and tradition. At the time when the Jewish world was just preparing to reinstate Spinoza within the Jewish canon, Strauss could conclude his critique of Cohen with the following pronouncement: “The Tractatus is a Christian-European, not a Jewish, event (Insofern ist der Traktat ein christlich-europäisches, kein jüdisches Ereignis).”41 In a single sentence, Strauss confers on Spinoza a more powerful and devastating herem than could ever have been delivered by the Amsterdam parnasim.

4. ‘The Good European’

Two years after his book on Spinoza was published, and the same year as the Spinoza tercentennial, Strauss once again set out to clarify Spinoza’s

last will and testament. Strauss’ essay “Das Testament Spinozas” (1932) asked how we should commemorate Spinoza today.

Strauss begins the essay by surveying the reception of Spinoza from condemnation after his excommunication, to partial vindication at the hands of Mendelssohn, to canonization by Moses Hess and Heinrich Heine, to the scholarly neutrality of the twentieth century. Strauss admits straight out that “Spinoza was a Jew” but then asks rhetorically: “But should we mention the names of other men, perhaps of equal rank with Spinoza, who were likewise born and educated as Jews and whom scarcely any Jew would dare to remember proudly and gratefully as a Jew?”

One may wonder whom Strauss has in mind in raising the specter of other now-forgotten figures who were equal to Spinoza. Strauss’ point is that it is not enough to have been born and educated as a Jew to be considered a great or venerable member of the Jewish tradition. How, then, are we to understand Spinoza?

It is not as a Jew but as a member of that “small band of superior minds” that Strauss, following Nietzsche, calls “the good Europeans” among whom Spinoza properly belongs:

To this community belong all the philosophers of the seventeenth century, but Spinoza belongs to it in a special way. Spinoza did not remain a Jew, while Descartes, Hobbes, and Leibniz remained Christians. Thus it is not in accordance with Spinoza’s wishes that he be inducted into the pantheon of the Jewish nation. Under these circumstances it seems to us an elementary imperative of Jewish self-respect that we Jews should at last again relinquish our claim on Spinoza. By so doing, we by no means surrender him to our enemies. Rather, we leave him to that distant and strange community of “neutrals” whom one can call, with considerable justice, the community of the “good Europeans.”

Strauss went further to deconstruct Spinoza’s alleged influence on the creation of the Zionist movement. Spinoza had been fêted in Jewish circles as a founder of Zionism on the basis of his statement that if the foundations of their religion had not “effeminated their mind,” it would still be possible to re-create a Jewish state—“so changeable are human affairs”—and thus gain God’s election “a second time.” Regarding Spinoza’s reference to God’s election as nothing more than an “empty phrase,” Strauss argues on the basis of this passage that it would be “risky” to


assign to Spinoza a privileged role in the Zionist movement. Spinoza does not so much endorse the creation of a Jewish state as consider it only a possibility (Möglichkeitsbedingung). “As if condescending from the height of his philosophical neutrality,” Strauss writes, “he leaves it to the Jews to liberate themselves from their religion and thus to obtain for themselves the possibility of re-constituting their state.”

Strauss also casts doubt on Spinoza’s claim that the loss of Jewish sovereignty was due to the “softening” or effeminating effects of Judaism. Strauss wonders why the same law that was said to lead to a weakening of political resolve could also be responsible for the strength to persevere even under the most adverse circumstances, such as the Inquisition. Just as Spinoza’s “teacher,” Machiavelli, had attributed to Christianity the corruption of Roman virtue, so does Spinoza make Judaism responsible for the impossibility of creating a Jewish state. It would seem that if the Jews wanted a state of their own, it would have to be at the expense of Judaism.

So what, then, is the testament of Spinoza? Strauss distinguishes his position from the vilifiers (Cohen) and the celebrators. Asking whether we still owe Spinoza our veneration, he answers as follows: “Spinoza will be venerated as long as there are men who know how to appreciate the inscription on his signet ring (caute) or, to put it plainly: as long as there are men who know what it means to utter [the word]: independence (Unabhängigkeit).” The independence that Strauss is referring to here is not the freedom to live as a Jew but the freedom to live apart from or outside one’s own theologico-political community. It is the freedom of the philosopher.

5. ‘A Hessian Minyan’

Strauss returned to these ancient debates exactly thirty years after the Spinoza tercentennial. In an autobiographical preface written on the occasion of the English-language translation of Die Religionskritik Spinozas, Strauss reprised the controversies of his youth. Gershom Scholem, to whom Strauss had sent a copy of the manuscript, declared the work “more remarkable” than anything Strauss had yet produced. In a letter of November 28, 1962, Scholem wrote: “I regard it as an intellectual

---

autobiography of yourself where one adventure of the spirit (and its mis-
haps) follows upon another.” Scholem claimed to find fault in Strauss’ omission of several important stages of his life’s story but then con-
tinued: “The readers, who know less about you than I, especially the poor Americans, who have heard little of horn-blowing, will probably be very much astonished (in English, “baffled”) by your reading.” Scholem ex-
pressed some surprise that such a work would actually be published and concludes: “I will keep the copy of the manuscript pristine, for who knows if you won’t at the last minute declare the manuscript ‘apocryphal,’ thereupon hiding it in a loft or cellar, as was usual from time immemo-
rial for such easily shocking literature.”

This last remark seems to have taken Strauss by surprise. Just over a week later, in a letter of December 6, 1962, he professed to be “in-
trigued” by Scholem’s words of caution and asked: “Should I understand it as an extremely polite and reserved counsel not to print my Preface?”

Responding to Scholem’s inquiry as to why he was now undertaking to publish such a testimony, Strauss’ reply was extremely revealing:

When studying Hobbes, I observed that what he said and did not say was a function of the heresy laws obtaining at the time of publi-
cation of his various works. But then I saw that in one of his works published at a time of considerable restriction he was more outspo-
ken than ever before. I was baffled until I noted that this book was published when he was already very old, with one foot in the grave, and I learned that this condition is conducive to courage. As for me I have had my first two heart attacks, Ergo.

And just a week after that, Scholem responded to Strauss, hoping to dispel “the anxieties that seem to have lain so gloomily over your heart.” “I, too, am agreeable to the printing of your autobiographical foreword to that old heretic Spinoza,” Scholem wrote. He then added: “You have my blessing, have no doubt, and most likely I (along with perhaps five or six other readers who might barely constitute a Hessian minyan) shall form the only legitimate nucleus of readers for this opuscule. For you will hardly be able to have any great illusions that these pages might be as good as impenetrable to American readers.”

Strauss’ “Preface” to his Spinoza book is perhaps his deepest and most complex piece of writing. It is a work that re-pays numerous

50 Ibid.
readings. He begins by reminding the reader that its author was “a young Jew born and raised in Germany who found himself in the grip of a theologico-political predicament.” His very term was borrowed from Spinoza. The “Preface” represents Strauss’ final settling of accounts with Hermann Cohen and the legacy of Spinoza. While Cohen had denounced Spinoza for his betrayal of Judaism, Strauss’ verdict was more complicated: “Spinoza,” he writes, was “the greatest man of Jewish origin who had openly denied the truth of Judaism and had ceased to belong to the Jewish people without becoming a Christian.” To be sure, this is a double-edged sword. In what way had Spinoza ceased to belong to the Jewish people, especially as he had never converted or formally renounced his heritage?

Strauss’ “Preface” takes a somewhat different tack than he had earlier adopted. “The purpose of the Treatise,” he writes, “is to show the way toward a liberal society.” Only a liberal society—that is, a society that is neither Christian nor Jewish—can make possible the freedom of philosophy. “Freedom of philosophy,” he avows, “requires, or seems to require, a liberal state, and a liberal state is a state which is not as such either Christian or Jewish.” Spinoza’s critique of Judaism is not the result of any anti-Jewish animus but is part of a strategy to achieve the emancipation of the Jews in a liberal state. Spinoza’s attempt to show the way beyond both Christianity and Judaism is not a sign of apostasy, as Cohen believed, but displays a marked “sympathy” for his people: “Spinoza may have hated Judaism,” Strauss affirms in a deliberately provocative sentence, “but he did not hate the Jewish people. However bad a Jew he may have been in all other respects, he thought of the liberation of the Jews in the only way in which he could think of it, given his philosophy.”

Strauss’ judgment that Spinoza may have hated Judaism but not the Jewish people is, he admits, “in some respects even stronger than Cohen’s thought.” Cohen had interpreted Judaism through the lenses of Kantianism. Judaism was for Cohen a repository of the same moral

54 Ibid., p. 239.
55 Ibid., p. 245.
56 Ibid., p. 246.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid., p. 244.
universalism that would be given philosophic expression by the philosopher of Königsberg. But Judaism mediated by Kantianism is no longer the Judaism that prevailed at the time of Spinoza; that is to say, it is no longer the body of laws and rituals that constitute Jewish Orthodoxy. Strauss suggests that Spinoza actually had a deeper understanding of Judaism than did Cohen. Cohen implicitly accepts Spinoza’s critique of Orthodoxy and asks instead how Judaism can be justified on the grounds of modern philosophy. This is confirmed by a story often told about Cohen at his expense. According to this story (which Strauss himself claimed to have related to Rosenzweig), Cohen read an account of his philosophy of religion before an Orthodox audience, after which a pious member of the congregation stood and asked, “But where is the God of creation (Borei olam)?” At that point, it is said, the great philosopher wept. In other words, Cohen realized that the God of the Bible had become in his philosophy a concept or an idea but not the living God of revelation. The implication is that Cohen had broken with Orthodoxy every bit as decisively as Spinoza. The difference seems to be that Spinoza knew what he was doing.

Strauss wants to go Cohen one better. He returns to Orthodoxy and asks whether Spinoza’s alleged refutation was successful. “Orthodoxy,” he writes, “could only be returned to if Spinoza was wrong in every respect.” But how could Spinoza be disproved in every respect? Strauss suggests that Spinoza’s critique of religion failed to penetrate the very bridgehead of Orthodoxy. “For all assertions of Orthodoxy,” he writes, “rest on the irrefutable premise that the omnipotent God, whose will is unfathomable, whose ways are not our ways, who has decided to dwell in the thick darkness, may exist.” From the fact that these premises have not been refuted, it follows not that they are true, merely that they are possible. An “indirect proof” of Spinoza’s failure to refute Orthodoxy was the Enlightenment’s recourse to satire and ridicule, but laughter cannot supply what reason cannot deliver.

Strauss realized that the failure to disprove revelation does not prove its truth, but it simply leaves revelation an open question. “The genuine refutation of Orthodoxy,” he continues, “would require the proof that the


60 Strauss, “Preface to Spinoza,” p. 239.

61 Ibid., p. 254; emphasis added.
world and human life are perfectly intelligible without the assumption of a mysterious God." But such a proof has yet to be demonstrated. Strauss takes Spinoza’s *Ethics* to represent a grand but noble failure. The premises of the *Ethics* are no more clear and self-evident than the premises of the Orthodoxy it set out to refute: “its cognitive status is no different from that of the Orthodox account.”

Strauss leaves the reader with a stark either/or: Either Spinoza or Torah, either Athens or Jerusalem, either resolute atheism or the most fundamentalistic Orthodoxy. Given this standoff, what is one to do? The failure of Spinoza’s rationalism has not guaranteed the victory of his antagonist, revealed religion. Strauss’ “Preface” concludes with a warning to those who would too quickly raise the banner of a triumphant Orthodoxy. “The victory of Orthodoxy through the self-destruction of rational philosophy was not an unmitigated blessing,” he writes. For the victory of Orthodoxy may mean the victory not of Jewish Orthodoxy, but of any movement or cause with sufficient faith or belief or strength of will behind it. “Other observations and experiences confirmed the suspicion that it would be unwise to say farewell to reason.”

6. A Spinozist Malgré Lui?

Strauss remained in one important respect a descendant of Spinoza. Strauss saw in Spinoza the founder of political Zionism, to which he had been “converted” as a teenager. Political Zionism was the movement to restore a Jewish state, preferably a secular and democratic state, for the sake of ensuring Jewish survival and prosperity. Strauss saw the Zionist project as “a profound modification” of traditional Jewish hopes regarding the messianic age. The message of Spinoza and the Zionist movement was that the Jews must cease their passive waiting for the Messiah and take affairs into their own hands, learning to act “like other nations” (I Samuel 8), if they are to re-gain their sovereignty. Was this call to be a nation like the others a call to assimilation? Yet Strauss could not help but declare the establishment of the State of Israel “a blessing for all Jews everywhere, regardless of whether they admit it or not.”

---

62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., p. 255.
64 Ibid., pp. 256–257.
Zionism was necessitated by the failure of the liberal state—the state that was the other half of Spinoza's legacy—to protect the Jews. To be sure, this was to some degree a specifically German problem. The liberal state was weaker in Germany than in other parts of Europe. In Germany the Weimar democracy was regarded by many as the very symbol of German defeat and humiliation at the hands of the English and the French. The Weimar constitution was tied to the legacy of the French Revolution and, as such, a foreign imposition on German soil. For many Germans of Strauss' generation—Thomas Mann especially comes to mind—liberalism was associated with the dominance of "Civilisation" over "Kultur," which meant above all Anglo-French commercial society. This kind of civilization was regarded as "superficial" and "corrupt," lacking the inner spirituality and depth of the German soul. Germany, by contrast, was viewed as the land of Kultur characterized by a true union of body and spirit whose special destiny was to provide an alternative to the commercial republics west of the Rhine.

The weakness of liberalism in Germany was understood by Strauss to be symptomatic of a more generalized inability of liberalism to solve the "Jewish question." Liberalism is the form of government based on the explicit recognition of the separation of the public and private spheres, the state and civil society. "Liberalism," Strauss writes, "stands and falls on the distinction between state and society or by the recognition of a private sphere." Only in a liberal state does religion cease to be the prerogative of the state and become the private affair of each citizen. Only in such a state can Jews and other minorities gain some measure of protection from state-sponsored bigotry. Yet, as Strauss also recognized, the end of official discrimination does not put an end to all discrimination. It merely shifts the balance from the public to the private side of the ledger. The state may be constitutionally unable to discriminate, but private individuals and groups may continue to do so. Should the state in the name of social justice attempt to step in and abolish all forms of discrimination? Strauss considers this possibility and rejects it as a cure worse than the disease. To abolish all discrimination would mean to abolish civil society as a sphere separate from the state. In the end, the liberal state may be the best available answer to the Jewish question, but it is no substitute for a Jewish state.

Strauss remained loyal to the Zionism of his youth largely for its restoration of simple Jewish self-respect at a time when Judaism was threatened.

---


by the “helotry of assimilation.” According to Strauss, he returned to this theme after spending the 1954–1955 academic year as a guest at the Hebrew University. In a letter to William F. Buckley’s conservative weekly The National Review, he protested the magazine’s “anti-Jewish animus.” Strauss defended the Labor Zionists who then ran the country, not because they were socialist trade unionists, but because they were “pioneers,” like the American Pilgrim fathers who form the “natural aristocracy” of the country. Strauss defended Israel as “an outpost of the West in the East” characterized by “heroic austerity supported by the nearness of biblical antiquity.” He concluded by praising political Zionism for its “attempt to restore that inner freedom, that simple dignity, of which only people who remember their heritage and are loyal to their fate are capable.”

It would, however, be incorrect to think of Zionism as Strauss’ final statement on the legacy of Spinoza. To be sure, Zionism sought to rescue Jewish honor and self-respect, but it did so on the basis of an assimilation of its own into the norms and culture of the modern secular state. The state it promised was not necessarily the State of Israel, for it could just as easily have been located in Canada or Katmandu. The problem with political Zionism was best revealed by cultural Zionism, with its claim that a Jewish state separated from Jewish culture and sensibilities would be no more than an “empty shell.” But even cultural Zionism was a halfway house. The cultural Zionists conceived of the Jewish tradition not as a divine gift or the fruit of revelation but as the product of the national mind or genius of the Jewish people. If political Zionism regarded Judaism through the lenses of the Enlightenment, cultural Zionism was an outgrowth of European romanticism, with its belief in the autonomy of distinct national cultures. It understood revelation as the product of culture rather than the other way around. To take the Jewish tradition seriously would require cultural Zionism to become religious Zionism. But then religious Zionism understands itself as Jewish faith first and Zionism only secondarily.

Strauss, I hasten to add, was not a religious Zionist. He did not equate politics and redemption and even explicitly warned against it. “The Jewish people and their fate,” he told a Hillel audience in Chicago, “are the living witness for the absence of redemption.” No one should mistake the possession of sovereignty for the solution to the Jewish question, much

---


72 Leo Strauss, “Why We Remain Jews,” in Green, Jewish Philosophy, p. 327.
less for a sign of the world to come. In important respects, the Jewish question remains above history and politics. It cannot be answered by purely human means alone; rather, it indicates the limits of all human solutions:

The establishment of the State of Israel is the most profound modification of the Galut (exile) that has occurred, but it is not the end of the Galut: in the religious sense, and perhaps not only in the religious sense, the State of Israel is a part of the Galut. Finite problems can be solved; infinite, absolute problems cannot be solved.... From every point of view it looks as if the Jewish people were the chosen people at least in the sense that the Jewish problem is the most manifest symbol of the human problem insofar as it is a social and political problem.73

Strauss’ point, if I understand it, is that Judaism cannot be reduced to politics (Spinoza) or culture (Cohen), but it participates in something eternal. He was probably closer here to his early mentor Franz Rosenzweig, to whom the Spinoza book was dedicated and who regarded the destiny of the Jews to be not a political people but a people of prayer and study.74 Strauss’ devotion to the close reading of texts with a small circle of friends and students is perhaps a testimony to Rosenzweig’s influence. The Jews are destined to be a people who live both inside and outside of history and thus are to remain in some sense a people in exile, who straddle the border, as it were, between Deutschtum and Judentum.

Strauss did not accept Rosenzweig’s highly apolitical conception of Judaism, but his claim that the State of Israel remains a part of the Galut indicates his awareness of the limits of purely political responses to the Jewish question. His claim that the Jewish question remains one of those “infinite, absolute problems” remains a standing rebuke to Spinoza and those who believe that “the world and human life are perfectly intelligible without the assumption of a mysterious God.”75 Strauss frequently spoke about the world, about Being, as something deeply mysterious and impenetrable to reason alone. Spinoza, the archetypal man of the Enlightenment, believed that the Jewish question, like all questions, must admit a rational answer. Strauss held almost a diametrically opposed view, namely, that the evidence of the problems always outweighs the evidence

of the solutions. To re-awaken this sense of the permanence of the Jewish question would be Strauss’ answer as to how we today should remember Spinoza’s excommunication.

Yale University