

CONTEMPORARY JEWISH POLITICAL THEORY

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Jewish political theorizing is hard to delineate, since whatever reflections are forthcoming about the Jewish community almost by definition fall under this rubric. Reflections about life and death (and communal practices of entering and exiting the community), intermarriage, and the rights of the *agunah* are certainly aspects of Jewish political theory. Yet such first-order policy oriented discussions are probably not the kind of musings that first come to mind in connection with a brief discussion of contemporary Jewish political theory. If one ascends, instead, to a more general, metatheoretical level, where debates focus on justice, rights, deserts, the aims of law, and the trajectories and intersections of the secular and the sacred, I suspect the student of Jewish political theory and political philosophy will find himself or herself on more familiar turf. There the student or practitioner of Jewish political theory joins hands with the tradition of political theorizing since Plato. Indeed, the issues debated by Jewish political theorists are part of general political theorizing.

Plato, on account of the medieval Islamic influence on Maimonides, was historically far more influential than Aristotle or Cicero on Jewish political philosophy, and the student of Jewish political philosophy will consequently note that normative issues relating to how things should or ought to be are often embedded in seemingly descriptive accounts. Plato's discussion of human nature is not "flat," but the grounds for a program of political reform. And the same is true for Rambam, and

for Spinoza as well. Political anthropology underwrites political reform, and it is most difficult to demarcate crisply between normative and descriptive studies in Jewish political

philosophy. Recent books by Lenn Goodman (*On Justice: An Essay in Jewish Philosophy*, 1991), Menachem Kellner (*Must a Jew Believe Anything?* 1999 [2nd edition, 2006]), David Hartman (*A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism*, 1998), and David Novak (*Covenantal Rights*, 2000), however much they differ from each other, tease out normative considerations from traditional texts, and in this way these political philosophical texts could in principle be action-guiding. These books are among the most important contributions by contemporary theorists, reflecting in many ways the influence of recent Anglo-American political theory. John Rawls and Alasdair MacIntyre, as well as other thinkers writing out of the natural law tradition, are the interlocutors of thinkers who take their bearings from the Jewish political tradition in debates over justice and deserts, the nature of contractual obligation, relevant distinctions between contract and covenant, and the trajectory of positive law.

Contemporary Jewish political theory can also be understood to encompass recent work of a historical nature. I included chapters on medieval political philosophy in *History of Jewish Philosophy* (1997, 2003) and in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (2003), and their authors, Abraham Melamed and Menachem Lorberbaum, have written at greater length on historical subjects (Melamed, *Philosopher-King in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Political Thought*, 2003;



Baruch Spinoza. Photograph by Sophus Williams of painting(?) by E. Hader, 1884. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov.

Lorberbaum, *Politics and the Limits of Law: Secularizing the Political in Medieval Jewish Thought*, 2001). It should perhaps be noted that Lorberbaum, a coeditor of the multivolume *The Jewish Political Tradition* (2000–) discussed elsewhere in this issue, is connected with the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. Founded by David Hartman in 1976, this modern Orthodox think tank has been the engine of much innovative political policy in Israel and a catalyst for political theorizing of the highest order. The editors of *Hebraic Political Studies*, discussed in some detail elsewhere in this issue, are explicit about their journal's focus on "recovering the Hebraic political tradition and evaluating its place in the history of political thought." They view the Hebraic political tradition as "distinct" from others, and occluded on account of the secularizing tendencies of the Enlightenment. It remains to be seen how distinct the Hebraic political tradition really is from other so-called Western political traditions, and it should also be noted that the Enlightenment itself

is increasingly reconceived as abetting a religious vision of its own.

A signal moment in contemporary Jewish political theory is the plethora of recent work on Spinoza and his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP). Published anonymously in 1670, it is a foundational text for political liberalism and the separation of Church and State. It is read as a strong critique of traditional Judaism and a vindication of the freedom of the individual to think as he or she wishes. Steven Smith in *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (1997) takes the TTP to be less a critique of a historical religion than a meditation on the identity of modern man, caught between tradition and history. Spinoza addressed the “Jewish Question” long before Marx’s *Zur Judenfrage*, and some of the most provocative work in contemporary Jewish political theory turns out to be work on issues put forth by Spinoza. Spinoza has been read as a proto-Zionist by those who see in his work a stinging negation of Diaspora history and its communal traditions and belief in divine redemption. Even a work such as J. Samuel Preus’s *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority* (2001) is not without clear political implications arising from Spinoza’s radical biblical hermeneutics. Such political readings of Spinoza serve to redefine a whole host of traditional subjects such as messianism, prophecy, election, and even religion itself. Of late, important work has been done on Jewish themes in Spinoza by Zev Harvey

and Michael Rosenthal, and there is even a collection edited by Heidi Ravven and Lenn Goodman, *Jewish Themes in Spinoza’s Philosophy* (2002).

Spinoza’s arch-enemy is Maimonides, the greatest of the medieval Jewish thinkers. The late Lawrence Berman emphasized in many articles (for example, “Maimonides, the Disciple of Alfarabi,” *Israel Oriental Studies* [1974]) the Farabian political element in Rambam’s thought. One major point here is his indebtedness, via Farabi, to Plato and the latter’s notion of the

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philosopher-king for his very own understanding of prophecy. The prophet (Moses) is a philosopher-king, wedding metaphysical insight with political power. Abraham Melamed has contributed a learned treatise, mentioned previously, on the history of the notion of the philosopher-king in Jewish political thought. This turns out to be part of a longer story about the tension within Jewish political theorizing between democratic and non- (even anti-) democratic elements. The debate between Maimonides and Spinoza can be seen, then, as not just one between religious and non-religious thinkers, but also as a political debate between a Greek-inspired metaphysically-grounded politics and a Hobbesian-inspired politics grounded in a contract

without divine (or metaphysical) sanction.

What can be said in conclusion about the general state of contemporary Jewish political thought? It is alive and well at the beginning of the new millennium. Nonhistorical studies reflect a healthy awareness of general (non-Jewish) work in the field, and one hopes that this will remain the case. If I must hazard a guess, I would say that normative work in Jewish political thought will continue to refine a political theology that makes ample room for a principled pluralism. Recent work on “liberal”

versions of virtue theory and “perfectionist” accounts of political morality by, among others, William Galston, Joseph Raz, and George Sher, as well as innovative work on the republican tradition by Phillip Pettit and Quentin Skinner might be useful for Jewish political theorizing, for it

allows one to incorporate a healthy sense of community (and peoplehood) while also making room for notions of freedom and autonomy so prized in discussions of political liberalism. And finally, historical work is also showing signs of increasing awareness of external (non-Jewish) influences on Jewish political thinkers. This is not to be resisted, but welcomed as a sure sign that Jewish political thought and Jewish political thinkers, working on problems that define them as such, are part of a grand tradition of political theorizing.

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