

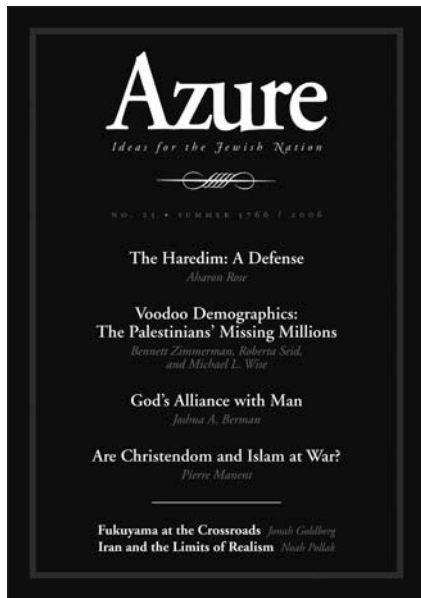
FROM “AZURE” TO “HEBRAIC POLITICAL STUDIES”

Allan Arkush

The Jerusalem-based but by no means exclusively Israeli Shalem Center calls itself “a research institute dedicated to Jewish and Israeli social thought and policy.”

Outside observers commonly describe it as a “neoconservative think tank” funded by wealthy Americans and devoted to providing the Israeli right with more solid intellectual grounding. In carrying out its mission, the Center, however one chooses to characterize it,

has for ten years been publishing *Azure*, a quarterly that focuses on what its subtitle refers to as “Ideas for the Jewish Nation.” Since its inception this journal has been engaged in a “comprehensive attempt at understanding the basic concepts and values which have caused” what its editors perceive to be the current “crisis in Jewish nationalism.” It has been concerned not only with interpreting the world but with changing it as well. In their very first issue *Azure’s* editors announced their intention “to seek out and consolidate a new common denominator among Jews who still believe in the Jewish state.” They aimed “to form a new consensus capable of refashioning our national goals.”



Courtesy of the Shalem Center

“an international peer-reviewed journal.” This journal seeks above all to recover “the Hebraic political tradition” developed through the ages “by Jewish, Christian, and Islamic thinkers—rabbis, theologians, scholars, and statesmen—who drew ideas with political import from the Hebrew Bible, and who interacted with each other and with the philosophical traditions they

encountered.” The editors of *Hebraic Political Studies* articulate no broader aim than evaluating the place of this tradition in “political history and the history of political thought” in general.

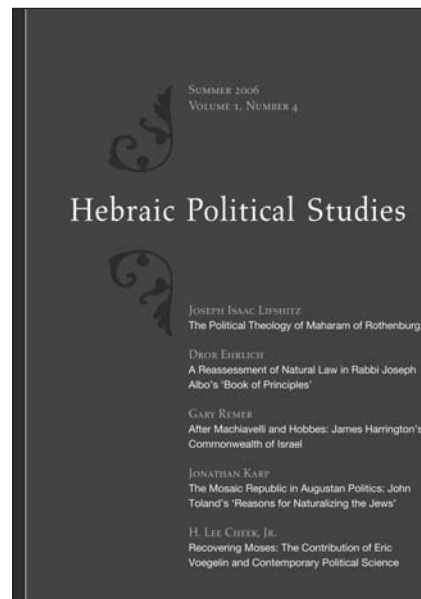
A comparison of the very pronounced political goals of the older publication with the emphatically academic character of the newer one might seem to indicate that the latter is more deserving of attention in our survey of the field of Jewish political

studies. But the difference between these two journals is not as clear-cut as the manifestos of their (entirely different) editors might seem to suggest. *Hebraic Political Studies* has already published in its very short lifetime articles that resemble others that have appeared in *Azure*, including a piece by Shalem Center founder and frequent *Azure* contributor Yoram Hazony entitled “Does the Bible have a Political Teaching?” And *Azure* has published articles that could easily be imagined in the pages of *Hebraic Political Studies*, such as Joseph Dan’s “Jewish Sovereignty as a Theological Problem” and Yosef Yitzhak Lifshitz’s “Foundations of a Jewish Economic Theory.”

In fact, the article that seems to have served as the inspiration for the creation of *Hebraic Political Studies*, Fania Oz-Salzberger’s “The Jewish Roots of the Modern Republic,” originally appeared in

Azure in 2002. In this essay Oz-Salzberger, who teaches modern history at the University of Haifa, maintains that “the story of political Hebraism, the sustained effort to read the Bible politically during the seventeenth century, is one of the most exciting chapters in the history of political thought.” If it is now little known,

the fault basically lies with the influential Enlightenment *philosophes* who “no longer needed the Old Testament and the republic of the Hebrews” in order to formulate their political theories. Observing the manifest weaknesses of the “thin liberalism” to which these theories ultimately gave rise, however, Oz-Salzberger calls for a re-examination



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of the texts rendered almost obsolete by the *philosophes*. Her point is “not to glory in whatever Jewish chromosomes may be found in the genome of Western political thought.” It is “to consider and reconsider which parts of these sources, and of the inspiration they offered to European theorists of liberty, might be of value to us today.”

By “us” Oz-Salzberger means not only Israelis or Jews but everyone who feels that the “gamble on the part of post-Enlightenment liberalism did not pay off . . .” She invites all such people to “return to the great laboratory of the seventeenth century” for reorientation. If “we look again,” she concludes, “to the ancient Hebrew republic for inspiration . . . we may yet restore the questions of human nature, communal responsibility, and the deliberate actions of the individual into the heart of our own political discourse.”

In her endnotes, Oz-Salzberger extends her gratitude to Yoram Hazony, the founder of the Shalem Center, for his “deep interest” in her work. And it is indeed easy to see how Hazony might regard it as a very promising tool for developing ideas for the Jewish nation that could help it to refashion its goals. Inspired by Oz-Salzberger, he brought together his dissertation adviser at Rutgers, Gordon Schochet, who is a specialist in seventeenth-century political thought, and the Dutch expert on Grotius, Arthur Eyffinger, to edit *Hebraic Political Studies*. The statement of their intentions in the journal’s first issue devotes a great deal of attention to the

seventeenth-century laboratory that is of such importance to Oz-Salzberger but, as we have already seen, it goes considerably beyond it, emphasizing the productive role of the Hebraic political tradition from antiquity to the present. In seeking an explanation for recent

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indifference to the Hebraic tradition in political thought, they do not identify specific culprits but are prepared only to assert that it is “perhaps due to a persistent and self-consciously secular Enlightenment heritage . . .” And they conclude their opening statement not with an expression of hope that contemporary political discourse can be transformed but with nothing more than a wish “that *Hebraic Political Studies* will help initiate a new field of scholarship . . .” In this connection it is worth noting that this journal appears only in English and not, like *Azure*, in a simultaneous and identical Hebrew version.

Not surprisingly, most of the articles in each of the first three issues of *Hebraic Political Studies* are devoted to seventeenth-century topics. One, Warren Zev Harvey’s “The Israelite Kingdom of God in Hobbes’ Political Thought,” is a translation of a piece that first appeared in *Iyyun* twenty-five years earlier. Many are expanded versions of papers initially given at a conference on “Political Hebraism: Judaic Sources in Early Modern Political Thought” held at the Shalem Center in 2004. These deal mostly with figures like

Hugo Grotius, Petrus Cunaeus, and John Locke, who were singled out by Oz-Salzberger in her article and Shochet and Eyffinger in their initial editorial statement. The Spring 2006 issue, for instance, includes an article by Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann entitled “Political

Theology in Renaissance Christian Kabbala: Petrus Galatinus and Guillaume Postel.”

But each issue also contains at least one article that has an ancient or a very modern theme. The very first issue includes a piece by Steven Grosby on

“The Biblical ‘Nation’ as a Problem for Philosophy,” and the latest issue includes an article by Avinoam Rosenak on “Law, Halacha, and Education: New Directions in the Philosophy of Halacha.”

After the appearance of its first three issues, it is clear enough that *Hebraic Political Studies* will be as wide ranging as its editors have promised it would be. It also appears clear that the political vision that contributed to its founding will not necessarily find direct expression in its pages. Despite its origins, *Hebraic Political Studies* may turn out to be a journal of more interest to students of forgotten corners of modern intellectual history than to people who aspire to revitalize liberalism in Israel in particular or in the Western world in general. Time will tell.

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