Welcome to the Religion and Culture Web Forum's public discussion board for March 2008. In this thread you will find the invited responses from Rabbi Shai Held, Leah Hochman, Jeffrey Israel, and Benjamin Sax.

To leave your own question or response to Jerome Copulsky's essay or to another posting, choose "post reply." In order to submit a comment, you must register with a personal user ID and password.

Debra Erickson
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Responding to the emergence in the late 1870s of young French Marxists, Karl Marx—according to his colleague Friedrich Engels—remarked: “All I know is that I am not a Marxist.” Indeed, this pithy and self-conscious statement of self-effacement would certainly have resonated with Baruch Spinoza, the seventeenth-century sage of Amsterdam. Mr. Copulsky, beginning with his succinct and erudite delineation of Spinoza’s “Theological-Political Treatise,” deftly elaborates how the thought of Spinoza and the reception of his thought were, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, inexorably interwoven.

Countless volumes have been written that attest to Spinoza’s influence on the formation of Jewish identity, religious thought, and political theology. Yet, by focusing on Hess’s unique reading and subsequent appropriation of Spinoza’s “Theological-Political Treatise” to form a new
Jewish nationalism, Copulsky highlights Hess’ innovative and self-conscious synthesis of Spinoza’s thought with contemporary sensibilities. Even though Spinoza lurks in the shadows of the thought of many Jewish thinkers who grappled with self-definition in response to the rise of liberal democracies and fervent nationalism in Europe, he is there even when Jews attempted to reform Judaism or to restore it to its imagined pre-Diasporic glory. Hess, according to Copulsky’s portrayal, is the first to “self-consciously do so.”

One wonders, though, whether Hess “unconsciously” espoused a particular ancient Jewish theme on dissent and its relationship to Jewish practice and tradition. There is, of course, the famous Baraita of the four rabbis who enter the Pardes [the “orchard”] where the divine presence resides. Ben Zoma emerged insane. Ben Azzai merely glimpsed at the orchard and died. While Akiba departed in peace, Elisha ben Abuya—the Akher—departed a heretic. This story is famously the Leitmotif of Isaac Deutscher’s “The Non-Jewish Jew,” which explores the notion of heresy as an innate, and in his judgment exalted, Jewish theological and cultural predisposition.

Even within so-called traditional Judaism, Spinoza is self-consciously interpreted by rabbis, as evidenced by a Hebrew translation of his “Treatise“ that is attributed to none other than Elisha ben Abuya himself (reincarnated through metempsychosis into the body of Spinoza). Is it legitimate and illuminating to regard Hess as participating in this radical culture of dissent? My guess is that Copulsky would most likely be wary of such a categorization of Hess’s thought.

Yet the synthesis of Spinoza’s thought and its reception has certainly gone in this direction. Take, for instance, as Copulsky astutely points out, the more vintage opinion that regards this philosopher as a “proto-Zionist,” or the fairly recent trend in academic scholarship to re-read Spinoza as an “unconscious” Maimonidean. Interestingly, the political Zionist Theodor Herzl, on a nineteen-hour train ride to Bad Aussee, Austria, read Hess’s “Rome and Jerusalem” and adopted a strikingly similar tone: “Wonderful the Spinozistic-Jewish and nationalist elements. Since Spinoza Jewry has brought forth no greater spirit than this forgotten, faded Moses Hess!”

As “an exalted, noble spirit,” Hess and Spinoza, for Herzl, characterized nothing less than his entire political task. The Janus-faced Spinoza—one facing backwards towards the religious tradition in which he was ensconced, the other facing forward toward the ultimate sublimation of all religions into a sustainable liberal democracy—portrays conflicting, if not entirely altogether contradictory, aspects of his thought. Even though Hess was not the first to attempt to reconcile this tension in Spinoza’s thought, he was certainly the first to embrace Spinoza as a Jewish thinker.

While Marx was busy distancing himself from the reception of his work, Friedrich Nietzsche labored to place the significance in philosophy not
on the textus, but rather on the living person. The obvious consequence of such a scheme resulted in the recondite pursuit to explicate a philosopher’s identity through her or his biography. According to the twentieth-century German-Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, Nietzsche throughout his life strived to meet the demands of several competing vocations: the poet, the saint, and the philosopher.

If one’s biography truly bespeaks a potential philosophy or ideology, then Spinoza certainly might be plausibly characterized as a proto-Zionist or a post-Maimonidean thinker, or even as a Jewish saint and philosopher. Also if Deutscher is correct, and there indeed exists this hidden dialectic within Judaism recurrently begetting dissent, who could be more Jewish than Spinoza? However, Spinozism as a specifically Jewish counter-tradition never culminated into any sustainable religious movement. In all seriousness, how could it? Nevertheless, we couldn’t possibly imagine the phenomenon of Modern Judaism, whether Orthodox or Reconstructionist, without him. The question now, in some sense, is whether or not we should include Moses Hess in these discussions. As the old traditional Jewish aphorism goes, “from Moses until Moses, there was none like Moses.” Perhaps Hess could take on the role of the latter Moses.

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Jerome Copulsky offers an insightful account of Moses Hess’s appropriation of Spinoza. Indeed, on Mr. Copulsky’s reading, Hess exemplifies Leo Strauss’s suggestion that “modern Judaism is a synthesis between rabbinical Judaism and Spinoza.” It is clear that Hess used his distinctive interpretation of “political Judaism” in Spinoza’s “Theological-Political Treatise” to construct his argument for Jewish nationalism. In addition, by theorizing a unity of the spiritual and the material, Spinoza provided the key ingredient for Hess to mount an alternative to both rabbinic orthodoxy and Reform Judaism.

Since he focused primarily on Hess’s Spinoza reception, it is not Mr. Copulsky’s burden to elaborate on other philosophical ingredients mixed into “Rome and Jerusalem.” But on the point of Hess’s materialization of the Jewish spirit in the Jewish nation – the transition from “The Holy History” to “Rome and Jerusalem,” it’s worth exploring whether Spinoza is a necessary, but not a sufficient ingredient. I will suggest that, as with most modern Jewish political thought, the influence of Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) is well worth exploring.
Herder was a contemporary and sometime correspondent of Moses Mendelssohn and an important contributor to the “Spinoza wars” of the 1780s. Though solicited by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi to join in the condemnation of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s apparent deathbed Spinozism, Herder responded to the news with his “God, Some Conversations,” defiantly allying himself with Lessing and defending his own brand of Spinozism. Particularly important for Hess’s later appropriation of Spinoza, Herder reads Spinoza as a kind of “vitalist”: whereas others condemned Spinoza’s allegedly mechanistic view of the world, Herder (at least in 1787) saw in Spinoza a picture of the world pulsating forward with life, more an organism than a machine. Like Hess, Herder filled a gap in his metaphysics with Spinoza’s theoretical unification of the spiritual and the material.

Still more interesting, given what we learn from Copulsky about Hess, Herder sees the pulsating force of world history as determinately bound to the flourishing of the wide array of Volker (“nations” or “peoples”) that populate the earth. In “This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity” and “Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Humanity,” Herder practically introduces the idea of cultural pluralism to the political discourse in Europe. Isaiah Berlin famously believed that Herder was the father of notions like nationalism and the Volksgeist. (Though, as an aside, Herder was simultaneously a sincere advocate of universal principles of justice, which he thought should govern international relations).

Herder thought that every Volk offered its own unique expression of humanity and its own examples of inhumanity as well). This included the Phoenicians as much as the Greeks, the “nations which are called savages“ and the empires of Europe. Herder vociferously opposed European imperialism and colonialism and the abomination of slavery; he wanted each cultural group to flourish in its natural environment, offering outsiders a glimpse of their own humanity that they could not otherwise imagine. And it was precisely in terms of nature that he understood the Volker: each is born out of particular soil, out of family ties, language, and means of production.

To my ears, the echoes of Herder are audible in Hess. Isaiah Berlin has a useful footnote in his essay, “Herder and the Enlightenment,” summarizing some of Herder’s comments on the Jews in “Ideas.” Herder’s picture is worth comparing to Mr. Copulsky’s account of Hess’s Spinozistic Jewish nationalism: “Herder was fascinated by the survival of the Jews; he looked upon them as a most excellent example of a Volk with its own distinct character (x 139). ‘Moses bound the heart of his people to their native soil’ (xii 115). Land, common language, tradition, sense of kinship, common law as a freely accepted ‘covenant’ – all these interwoven factors, together with the bond created by their sacred literature, enabled the Jews to retain their identity in dispersion – but especially the fact that their eyes remained focused upon their original geographical home (xii 115, viii 355, xvii 312) – historical continuity, not race, is what counts (xii 107).” (“Three Critics of the
Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder,” 183 n. 3). (Notice, by the way, that Herder argued for Jewish national distinctiveness, but was explicitly not a racist).

I’m not sure whether Hess had direct contact with Herder’s work. Berlin writes: “Like the eighteenth-century humanist Herder, he [Hess] believed in the natural differentiation of mankind into separate races or nations. He did not bother to define these concepts, since he thought that they signified something that all sane men recognized, and which had only acquired disreputable associations because of the brutal acts that had been, and still were, committed in their names” (“Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas,” 230-231).

Whether or not there was direct contact, I’m left wondering: could Hess have extended Spinoza’s unification of the spiritual and the material, and his “political Judaism,” into the robust argument for Jewish national consciousness in “Rome and Jerusalem,” without the mediating ingredient of Herder?

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Anonymous
Posted: 10 Mar 2008 20:04 Post subject: Shai Held's response to Jerome Copulsky

“Were it not that the fundamental principles of [the Jews’] religion discourage manliness, I would not hesitate to believe that they will one day, given the opportunity—such is the mutability of human affairs—establish once more their independent state, and that God will again choose them.” With these famous words, Baruch Spinoza earned himself a permanent place in the Zionist pantheon (Copulsky rightly wonders: “What did Spinoza mean by this? Was it a prediction, a directive, a scientific observation, a joke?” The debate rages on to this very day).

While some Zionist thinkers turned to Spinoza’s political writings in search of a kind of “pre-endorsement” of their worldview, others--primarily religious Zionists--were so put off by Spinoza’s metaphysics that they could not participate in the veneration. As Dov Schwartz has shown, two of Spinoza’s “sins” stood out in particular: first, the Dutch philosopher’s picture of the universe was fundamentally static, and as such it precluded both creation and redemption. Modern Jewish life showed signs of active divine intervention, these Zionists contended--intervention which by Spinoza’s lights was ruled out of hand. Indeed, things were even worse than that: Spinoza’s determinism, they argued, rendered problematic not only God’s involvement in history, but human moral responsibility as well. What could be more foreign, more unacceptable to Judaism than a worldview that made no room for bechirah (human free will), teshuvah (repentance), and ge’ulah (Redemption)?
Spinoza’s second sin was that he identified God with nature, abandoning the all-important transcendence of God and succumbing to pantheism. In other words, not only was freedom excluded, but God as Creator and Providential Guide of history was eliminated by three fateful words: deus sive natura (God, that is, nature). While some religious Zionist thinkers had pantheistic leanings, they held back from the extremes of philosophical monism. After all, their movement was formed in response to the transcendent will of the commanding God. So while Spinoza may have anticipated the Zionist project in a few stray sentences, his larger oeuvre contradicted everything for which religious Zionists stood. It is not Zionism alone, but rather Jewish theology as a whole, that must express deep hesitation about Spinoza’s metaphysics.

Jewish theology, it seems to me, is premised on two claims: first, that the world as it is is not the world as it must be; and, second, that transformation from the former to the latter is possible. While human beings alone cannot redeem the world (and the pretense otherwise can have murderous consequences), the decisions they make can and do have a profound impact on human history, and indeed (as we are learning in this generation as never before), on the history of the cosmos as a whole.

Judaism, when all is said and done, is about freedom—both God’s and ours. In different ways, both Passover and the Days of Awe bring freedom to the fore—the former tells of a long-entrenched status quo miraculously overturned, the latter reminds Jews of God’s creation and of humanity’s capacity for change and re-creation. Put somewhat crudely, we might say: no creation or redemption, no freedom or repentance—no Judaism.

Judaism’s confidence in freedom and its possibilities is traditionally rooted in faith in the transcendent God. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks recently wrote, it is God’s transcendence which opens up a gap between “is” and “ought.” “From where,” Sacks asks, “do the thoughts arise that we can change the world and humanize it, making it less random and cruel and creating within its deserts, oases of justice and gardens of grace? The key idea is transcendence: that God is to be found not within nature but beyond it. At a stroke, this relativized all human institutions. Nothing in society is at is because it could not be otherwise.” (“To Heal a Fractured World,” 133). In jettisoning divine transcendence, Spinoza abandoned not just Judaism’s theological core (he would surely have been indifferent to the charge), but arguably surrendered the basis for Judaism’s socially transformative power. Spinoza’s metaphysics, one might suggest, casts a long shadow over his politics.

Jerome Copulsky has written a rich and stimulating study of Spinoza and Hess, and how the latter made use of the former in crafting his...
bold new synthesis of socialism and Jewish nationalism. There is a great deal more to be said about Hess in light of Copulsky’s work—about Hess’ relentless insistence on Judaism’s this-worldliness and thus its purported superiority to Christianity (Hess had an important and often overlooked role in the history of Jewish-Christian polemics); about Hess’ commitment, shared by many of his socialist-Zionist successors, to locating precedent for socialism in biblical texts; or about his daring affirmation that nationalism and universalism need not live in tension with one another—indeed, that at some level, they require each other.

At some level, Hess really was one of Zionism’s forgotten heroes, and Copulsky has made a valuable contribution to the scholarly literature on him (see also Avineri and Koltun-Fromm). Yet the central point I have sought to make should not be too easily dismissed—namely, that there is something ironic about Zionist thinkers appealing to Spinoza in developing their own visions of political messianism. For, after all, Spinoza’s metaphysics seems to rule out the very possibility of change, let alone radical change. Zionism could dream of a world transformed, but there were crucial limits to whether and how Spinoza could contribute to that dream.

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Rabbi Shai Held

Anonymous

Posted: 11 Mar 2008 18:08    Post subject: Leah Hochman’s reply to Jerome Copulsky

In Jerome Copulsky’s mischievous essay, the reader is invited to suspend a series of beliefs in order to ponder not just the theological implications of Spinoza’s political view of Judaism but also the political implications of Moses Hess’ religious view of the same. Using Leo Strauss’ introduction to “Spinoza’s Critique of Religion” as his own, Copulsky provides a frame through which one might view the unlikely pairing of the 17th century Spinoza and the 19th century Hess: “modern Judaism is a synthesis between rabbinical Judaism and Spinoza.”

With little contextualization, the reader could take this suggestion at face value—along with Copulsky’s reading of it—to mean that modern Judaism is, as Copulsky states, “in some measure a consequence or an incorporation of Spinoza.” That a synthesis is neither quite a consequence nor an incorporation is clear; that the author teases us with this idea before he gets to the seriousness of suggesting Hess as the exemplar of that possibility hints that he has other tricks up his sleeve.

Some of those tricks appear even before Copulsky’s clever and clear detailing of Spinoza’s politicizing of pre-exilic Judaism. Using Strauss to set up his essay, Copulsky commandeers the discourse of modern
Jewish thought and turns it entirely toward political concerns (unfairly, I believe) and to claim (rightly, I think) that the “problematic” that motivates much of modern Judaism begins with Spinoza. Of course, Strauss could be seen as responsible for that scholarly emphasis on the political as much as Spinoza is in providing that fodder. Though other scholars would say that Spinoza was less the magi of modern Judaism and more the “bogeyman” (see Jonathan Israel’s “Radical Enlightenment”), Strauss’ purposeful play with the word “synthesis” provides just the opportunity to reclaim, if not redeem, a thinker like Hess.

Focusing on the politics of Judaism as the emblem of modernity—the reordering of its essential claims to emphasize theocratic presumptions—makes modern forms of Judaism seem to matter more than reflection on the modernizing of Jewish liturgy, theology, and ritual might. And such a focus provides the opportunity to claim a far more universal outlook than is generally afforded to post-Enlightenment Judaism. But while I agree that an “overcoming” of Judaism might look like a Hessian utopia, I suspect that a mix or true synthesis of rabbinic Judaism and Spinoza would look a lot more like the current Israeli settler movement. And to call Hess a Spinozistic prophet, or more precisely, to reveal that Hess called Spinoza a “prophet who best articulated the essence of Judaism” in light of Spinoza’s scathing critique of prophecy suggests Copulsky’s own sense of play.

In thinking about Spinoza’s rendering of Israel as a theocracy that lost its utility after the loss of its state and Hess’ attempt to redirect Jewish aims toward national independence Copulsky’s essay reminded me again of one of the main issues of modern Jewish thought: God. Spinoza’s God is neither personal nor transcendent, and therefore quite literally cannot serve in any of the roles to which rabbinic (or biblical) Judaism had ascribed God. Not a resource, nor a comfort, nor a redeemer, Spinoza’s immanent God can be no more political than revelatory.

That early modern blasphemy scandalized the eighteenth century and ruined many a reputation (if not also lives: see Reimarus, Lessing, and Mendelssohn). But the Kantian formulation of morality, which critiqued Judaism as beholden to a divine legislation that Kant found impossible while promoting an ethical ideal that seemed at once wholly free, wholly moral and wholly modern, provided liberal minded Jews an out. In de-politicizing Judaism—seen by Hess as divestiture of great harm—Kantian-inspired Liberal Judaism created a counter balance that retained God as the head of an ethical body while redefining the means to understand the reality of 1800 years of diaspora. In other words, the Reformers of the early 19th century turned Judaism into a “religion” full of faith and belief and the conviction that others (read: non-Jewish Germans) would follow their lead.

That Hess had the vision to see that the project was only mildly successful for Jews (the retention of God as the point of Jewish
reference) and did not at all seem to be successful to non-Jews (interested as they were in “Jewish noses”) is a mark of his ability to use the great intellectual influences of his life to positive and useful advantage. Reaching back to Spinoza for a political paradigm (like early Reformers reached back to the prophets for their models of ethical behavior), Hess anticipated the amalgamation of politics and secular Judaism that became Zionism. (He was not alone—nor was he first—in his utopian vision; in the 1820s two American Jews—Mordecai Noah in New York and Moses Levy in Florida—also promoted separatist, nationally constitutive enclaves that promised freedom from oppression and physically enabling expressions of Jewish civilization.)

What is so fantastic about Hess, to which Copulsky draws our attention, is that he thinks he does so within the framework of a religiously modern Judaism, that is, of a religious Judaism he thinks can also be political. The ambiguities of that idea—the mixing of national, particularistic, moral, and political aspirations with religious heritage—beautifully describes the uncertainties of contemporary Jewish identities. Yet, one of the many ironies of Hess’ account is his inability to see just how much God mattered—both to Spinoza and to the Liberal Jews he critiqued—and matters still. The great unresolved issue of modern Judaism is how to account for God, who—despite centuries of debate and dissent, secularization and renewal—remains a political quandary. One wonders what Hess, and Strauss for that matter, would think of current syntheses of Spinozistic politics and Jewish religiosity and what suggestions they might have about the myriad forms of religious, secular, nationalistic, and political Judaism that exist now.

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