

**THE LAST PROPHET:
SPINOZA AND THE POLITICAL THEOLOGY OF MOSES HESS***

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In the so-called “autobiographical” preface to the English translation of his book *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, Leo Strauss provocatively suggested that “modern Judaism is a synthesis between rabbinical Judaism and Spinoza” (27). At first glance, Strauss’s assessment of Spinoza’s impact upon modern Judaism seems implausible, if not utterly paradoxical. After all, Benedictus (Baruch) Spinoza had been excommunicated from the Jewish community and never did attempt to return to the fold. Nor did Spinoza seek to “reform” the rabbinical Judaism he had abandoned. The portrait he painted of Judaism in his writings was largely negative, if not outright hostile. What, then, are we to make of Strauss’s thesis that modern Judaism, the Judaism of nineteenth and early twentieth century, is in some measure a *consequence* or an incorporation of Spinoza?

Of course, Spinoza’s impact on modern thought can hardly be denied. His analysis of religion—which rested on his critiques of revelation and miracles—became commonplace during the Enlightenment. Spinoza was an important forerunner of the historical-critical approach to the Bible. The metaphysics Spinoza developed in the *Ethics* had a significant influence on the development of modern philosophy.

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Moreover, Spinoza's description of the Mosaic Law as the (political) law of the Israelite state had significant influence upon the Enlightenment's conception of Judaism. It was this image of Judaism as a "theocracy"—a decidedly negative image, picked up by thinkers such as Kant—which later Jewish thinkers had to struggle with. Spinoza was also an early theorist and proponent of what has become known as "liberal democracy," the political regime that promised neutrality with regard to the individual's religious belief, and which is often regarded as providing the best protection for the Jewish minority. In short, Strauss understood that Spinoza prognosticated the forces within which modern Judaism would emerge: the modern critique of revelation; the pressures brought about by modern biblical criticism; the threat (and possibilities) of pantheist metaphysics; the possibilities (and risks) of liberal politics; and the negative image of Judaism as a theocracy.

So, while modern Jewish thought is conventionally thought to have been inaugurated by Moses Mendelssohn, emerging within the horizon of Emancipation, *the problematic of modern Judaism*, as Strauss came to understand, commenced earlier, within a different political context, and with Sage of Amsterdam as its herald. Implicitly or explicitly, modern Jewish thinkers all grappled with Spinoza's teaching, and modern Judaism is, in this sense, a consequence of Spinoza.

Spinoza's Theological-Political Critique of Judaism

Like other political theorists of the seventeenth century, Spinoza developed his political theory in response to ongoing internecine strife. Like Hobbes, whom he had studied, Spinoza considered religion to be the most significant problem for politics. To solve it, Spinoza believed that the political order needed to be set on a firm secular

footing, out of reach of priests and theologians, and that the religious passions of human beings would have to be taken into account and managed by the state. From the political problem of religion emerged theological-political critique of Judaism.

For Spinoza, religion was a human fabrication, the consequence of men's ignorance, fear, and desire. But he understood that, if it were formulated correctly and carefully managed, religion could prove useful as a tool for political obedience and social cohesion. In his *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670), he did not strive to demolish religion outright but to construct from the rubble of his critiques of prophecy, miracles, and Scripture a reformed religion which could be controlled by and shore up obedience to the modern secular state. Furthermore, since the ancient Israelite polity served as a model for political organization in the Netherlands (and also in England and the American colonies), Spinoza's task also involved an inquiry into the contemporary significance of the political teachings of the Old Testament. This evaluation of the biblical polity would lead to an evaluation of contemporary Judaism. Thus, in the course of his argument, Spinoza introduced a conception of Judaism as theocracy, a conception which lay at the foundation of modern Judaism and against which modern Jews would have to defend and define themselves.

Spinoza argued that the Mosaic Law was the constitution of a *political regime*. At Sinai, Moses had founded a "theocracy," in which the religious law was conscripted to support the mundane aims of the Hebrew state. By instituting a law which was believed to be divine revelation, Moses was able to motivate the people by appealing to their devotion to God, and to encourage their obedience by reminding them of benefits they had received (the liberation from Egyptian bondage), and the promise of future rewards

(in the Land of Canaan). The aim of this law was that “men should never act of their own volition but always at another’s behest, and that in their actions and inward thoughts they should at all times acknowledge that they were not their own masters but completely subordinate to another.”¹ Since the Hebrews were accustomed to a state of slavish submission, Moses placed them under a law consisting of constant ceremonial reminders obliging them to be subservient to their ruler at all times, and he taught them moral doctrines by means of historical narratives suitable to their intellectual capacity and experience.

In such a regime, “state civil law and religion were one and the same; the tenets of religion were not just teachings but laws and commands; piety was looked upon as justice, impiety as crime and injustice” (*TPT*, 196). The constitution also constrained the passions of the populace, and cultivated certain ideas valuable to the stability of the state. The Mosaic law “kindled such an ardent patriotism in the hearts of the citizens that it could never enter anyone’s mind to betray or desert his country; on the contrary, they must all have been of such a mind as to suffer death rather than a foreign yoke” (*TPT*, 204). This patriotic piety was reinforced by compulsory daily rituals, which intensified their sentiment of difference from other peoples and their hatred of them. But this law also inculcated a deep love of land and of freedom and the inability to endure foreign domination. It was a state in which patriotism was piety and in which there was no division between duties to it and duties towards God.

Spinoza also emphasized “a feature peculiar to this state,” one which appealed to “the motive of self-interest, the strength and life of all human action” (*TPT*, 205). The

¹ Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 66 (hereafter cited in the text as *TPT*).

constitution created what we today would consider a kind of “welfare state”; institutions alleviating poverty, such as the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, and the importance of the idea of the sanctity of the Land of Israel restrained the ambitions of the political leadership and fostered among the population a fierce sense of loyalty to the state.

Further, in Spinoza’s view, the “election” of Israel was not a supernatural phenomenon, but indicated the *political* fortune of the Hebrew state. That is, “election” was simply a natural and temporal matter. Israel was “elected” by God, so to speak, so long as the Israelite state endured. Since the Jewish law was the law of the state, when the state collapsed, the Jews were freed of the burden of their Law, and were obliged to follow the laws of the states in which they resided.

Now since this “election” was to be understood in purely naturalistic terms and not by means of an appeal to a doctrine of particular providence, Spinoza needed to account for what seems to be the uncanny existence of the Jews after the collapse of their state, their exile among the nations and ongoing commitment to their Law. Jewish tradition had claimed that this miraculous perseverance in exile was a sign of the Jews’ eternal election. Exile was regarded as divine punishment, but only a temporary dispensation, for one day God would dispatch His Messiah to deliver His people back to the land of their forefathers. And of course it was not only the Jews who regarded their survival as miraculous; Christian theologians had insisted that the survival of the Jews had religious import: the Jews’ debased condition was punishment for their rejection of Christ and living proof of the truth of the Christian religion.

Spinoza rejected these theological explanations. He argued that the proof-texts (such as Jeremiah 31:36 and Ezekiel 20:32) that contemporary “Pharisees” used to

maintain their claim of eternal election referred not to political election but to “true virtue,” that is, piety, which is not particular to the Jews, but is possible for all nations. It followed, then, that Jews had misunderstood the meaning of election.

The upshot of Spinoza’s account is that the Jews’ persistent allegiance to their obsolete Law isolates them from the rest of humanity and continues to entice the ongoing hatred of the people they live among. Spinoza suggested that if both sides relinquished their hatred, the Jews could assimilate completely. A distinct Jewish character would not remain, for “Jewishness” is not an innate national disposition but a political commitment. As a people’s character is determined by its laws and customs, the Jews would in time, Spinoza believed, become indistinguishable from the general populace among whom they dwelt.

To these reflections on the existence of the Jews in exile, Spinoza adjoined the following fascinating remark:

The mark of circumcision, too, I consider to be such an important factor in this matter that I am convinced that this by itself will preserve their nation forever. Indeed, were it not that the fundamental principles of their 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 (*TPT*, 47).²

² Compare to Spinoza’s statement that women (who are considered to be naturally weak) are to be excluded from the right of voting and office holding in a democracy in the last paragraph of the *Political Treatise*.

What did Spinoza mean by this? Was it a prediction, a directive, a scientific observation, a joke? Spinoza had argued earlier in the *Theological-Political Treatise* that the Mosaic Law had effectively promoted obedience and fierce loyalty to the state.

The effect of these ceremonies became politically fatal, however, only *after* the destruction of their state. The Law which had made the Jews patriotic and militarily strong in the exile now effeminizes their hearts, weakening them, and thus rendering them unfit for political activity.

Spinoza's seemingly offhand remark about the possibility of the Jews being "chosen again" may remind the reader of traditional Jewish messianic hopes for a return to the Land of Israel and the reestablishment of the state. It should be stressed, however, that Spinoza made this suggestion *without reference to the messianic idea in Judaism*. Spinoza proposed that human affairs are such that a restoration of the Jewish state is not inconceivable, but given how the Jewish religion has fashioned its adherents, is highly unlikely. If the Jews were to be "chosen again," their "election" would be the result of their own political assertion, not of particular providence.

From such examples, we can see that, leaving aside the prospect of the persistence of "orthodoxy," that is, of continued adherence to the law, Spinoza conceived of two possibilities concerning the future of the Jews: (1) their assimilation into a liberal state, or (2) the restoration of political independence. It is clear that he thought the first option far more likely. As a people cannot be subject to two political codes simultaneously, assimilation would entail casting off the yoke of the Law and acceptance of the law of the liberal state. Judaism could survive only insofar as it could accommodate itself to the loss of its Law, possibly as a kind of "private belief." But Judaism was fundamentally a legal

system; the Jews had been maintained in exile by the Law and by the hatred it evoked. In the terms of Spinoza's theory, it would seem highly unlikely that a Jewish identity expressed free of these elements could be effective or enduring. Nor does it seem that Spinoza would have put much of a premium on the persistence of such particularity, enunciated firmly within the realm of superstition.

Spinoza's suggestion opens up an intriguing paradox. According to Spinoza's reading of Scripture, the Jews were no longer bound to the Law after the collapse of their state. Nevertheless, this Law has served a crucial function in subsequent Jewish history; it preserved Jewish particularity and separatism. Given Spinoza's interpretation of the Mosaic Law as the political constitution of the Hebrew state, the Law only has value, it can only be a means to its proper end (political security and well-being), if the Jews reside within a state of their own. While Spinoza left open the possibility that the Jews could reestablish a state, the "fundamental principles of their religion" effeminize their hearts, holding them back from acting in such ways that might lead to regaining political power. The virtues needed to endure exile are different from those necessary to establish and maintain a state.

It would seem that in order to act politically, Jews would need to liberate themselves from the yoke of their Law. If the Jews choose to liberate themselves from the yoke of their Law (i.e. to assimilate), they would eventually lose their Jewish identity, for it is their Law and customs that define and maintain their particularity as a group. But it seems that this very Law suppresses political virtues or prevents them from emerging. If they did happen to be "chosen again," the new political situation and new state would seem to require the legislation (or "revelation") of a new constitution. Rather than the

persistence or reform of Judaism, Spinoza's theological-political outlook entails an *overcoming* of Judaism.

What Spinoza did not consider in the *Theological-Political Treatise* was the path pursued by modern Judaism, the attempt to refashion the tradition in such a way so that it posed no conflict to the political authority of the gentile state and allowed the Jews to take up their position as full-fledged citizens. Yet, Spinoza's account of Judaism created an image against which modern Jewish thinkers would battle.³ Arguably no Jewish

³ This can be seen in what many consider the first modern Jewish treatise, Moses Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem, or on Religious Power and Judaism*. Though his name is only uttered once in the text, Spinoza's critique of Judaism haunts Mendelssohn's work. It has been pointed out, in the eighteenth century by Saul Ascher in his *Leviathan, oder über Religion in Rücksicht des Judenthums* (1792), and in the twentieth by Julius Guttmann (1981), that Mendelssohn's depiction of Judaism as a "revealed legislation," bears significant structural similarities to Spinoza's discussion of the Mosaic law in the *Theological-Political Treatise*.

The motivations of the two political theories were strikingly different, however. While both Spinoza and Mendelssohn desired to secure freedom of thought, Mendelssohn wished to secure the freedom of religion as well. Spinoza subordinated all religious actions to the state; Mendelssohn, by contrast, attempted a defense of Judaism. In this defense, Mendelssohn applied Spinoza's reduction of Judaism to law and turned it into a virtue. But in order to do so, Mendelssohn had to restrict the contemporary jurisdiction of the law. The Mosaic legislation was not equivalent to the moral law (which does not require supernatural revelation to be known). It was no longer political (the law of the Hebrew state). Now, it is merely "ceremonial" (though it did serve, indirectly, political ends.) Judaism therefore posed no conflict with the law of the modern state.

If the struggle with Spinoza was implicit in Mendelssohn's treatment of Judaism, for the neo-Kantian philosopher and Liberal Jewish theologian Hermann Cohen, the struggle was explicit and direct (on Cohen's attitude towards Spinoza, see Franz Nauen "Hermann Cohen's Perceptions of Spinoza: A Reappraisal," and Hans Liebschütz, "Hermann Cohen und Spinoza"). For Cohen, Spinoza was a dangerous foe. Cohen found him guilty on two charges: first, of grave philosophical error—his pantheist metaphysics, which in subsuming all being into nature, destroyed the metaphysical ground of human ethical striving. Second, Spinoza had shown himself to be a true enemy of Judaism. Motivated by resentment against his former co-religionists, Spinoza was a slanderer of Judaism, a traitor to his own people, a provider of aid and comfort to her enemies.

What was Spinoza's treachery? Spinoza had stated that "the *religion* of Judaism, founded by Moses, set ... as its sole end the establishment and preservation of the Jewish *state*," a "polarization" intended to "destroy the Jewish concept of religion" (Hermann Cohen, "Spinoza über Staat und Religion," 293, quoted in "Cohen's Analysis of Spinoza's Bible Science" in *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, 144). By portraying Judaism in this way, Spinoza, Cohen believed, had provided the philosophical basis for modern anti-Semitism. Spinoza was therefore not a hero to be celebrated, the archetype of the modern Jew, who, despite his estrangement from the Jewish community nevertheless maintained a degree of national loyalty by not converting to Christianity. On the contrary, Cohen insisted that Spinoza's hatred of Judaism ran so deep that he was utterly oblivious to its fundamental and enduring idea: Judaism's prophetic ethos and messianic hope.

Yet, Cohen could not acknowledge his own debt to Spinoza. It was this debt that Strauss was trying to illuminate when he criticized Cohen for not realizing that his own Judaism was in fact a synthesis

thinker attempted this synthesis as self-consciously as Moses Hess, the nineteenth century radical provocateur turned Jewish nationalist. The remainder of this paper will consider the synthesis that Hess tried to articulate in his proto-Zionist manifesto, *Rom und Jerusalem, die letzte Nationalitätsfrage*.

Moses Hess and the Invention of Spinozistic Judaism

Though it was little regarded in his lifetime, Moses Hess' book, *Rom und Jerusalem*, published in 1862, remains an essential document of the emerging Jewish nationalist consciousness. Hess's treatise is significant for its unqualified rejection of the Liberal Jewish theology, its description and promotion of a Jewish national consciousness and the political program which emanated from it, and its respect for traditional rabbinic Judaism for its role in preserving nationality through religion (though disdainful of its increasing fanaticism and obscurantism). Hess argued that a return to a "national Judaism" would provide the alternative to "dry orthodoxy" and "superficial rationalism" of Reform.⁴ In advocating for this national Judaism, Hess appealed to the one whom he considered Judaism's latest prophet: Spinoza.

Hess's appeal to Spinoza is unsurprising. Already in his youth, Hess had considered himself a disciple of the philosopher. He signed his first book, *Die heilige Geschichte der Menschheit* (1837)—the first German socialist tract—*Von einem Jünger*

of traditional Judaism and Spinoza. In this sense, Cohen was, like the Jewish reformers of the nineteenth century, endorsing a vision of Judaism that was indebted to Spinoza.

⁴ Moses Hess, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Last Nationalist Question*, trans. Meyer Waxman (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 39 (hereafter cited in the text as *RJ*). The German-language edition consulted is *Rom und Jerusalem, die letzte Nationalitätsfrage*, in *Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Horst Lademacher (Köln: Joseph Melzer Verlag, 1962). On Hess' intellectual development, see Isaiah Berlin, "The Life and Opinions of Moses Hess"; Shlomo Avineri, *Moses Hess: Prophet of Communism and Zionism*; Edmund Silberner, *Moses Hess: Geschichte seines Lebens*.

Spinozas. In his comprehensive study of Hess's thought, Shlomo Avineri suggested Hess's *nom de plume* was "a symbolic challenge" that allowed him to distinguish himself from the "Young Hegelians"—even though Hess relied on a more or less Hegelian dialectical framework throughout that book. For Hess, Spinoza, rather than Hegel, was "the prophet of the modern social age" (Avineri, 21f).

An enthusiastic and erratic text, *The Holy History of Mankind* traces the progress of world history. In this narrative, Jews occupy a central role. It is the "universalizing Jews"—Jesus and Spinoza—who serve as prophets of new dispensations in world history. Spinoza, to whom Hess refers throughout his text as "the Master," inaugurated the third and final phase, the era of "the revelation of God [as] Holy Spirit," of God revealed "in the bright light of reason."⁵ In Hess's view, the philosophical insight of Spinoza brings about a sublation of Jewish and Christian moments: "Just as Christ did not wish to overturn through his teaching the Old Law, in so far as it was divine, but only to widen it, so Spinoza repudiated neither the Christian nor the Jewish religion, in so far as they were divine" (*HH*, 45).

This achievement was on account of Spinoza's metaphysics in which "the knowledge of God, the united consciousness of life" was made manifest. This teaching would yield new harmonious social formation, one based on a common "striving towards unity and equality" (*HH*, 64). Spinoza's teaching of the unity of matter and spirit would usher in modern age which overcomes social inequalities in a new socialist community—"the new Jerusalem"—which would emerge in the heart of Europe (*HH*, 84). This perfect community, "the Kingdom of God," would be marked by the equality of women,

⁵ *The Holy History of Mankind and Other Writings*, ed. Shlomo Avineri (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 37 ff (hereafter cited in the text as *HH*).

the replacement of the family by the state, the disappearance of “matrimonial bondage” and institution of free love, etc. It would be a society without “contradictions” and would bring about a natural harmony between states (*HH*, 88, 90).

In his description of this new social formation, a society based on socialist principles, Hess pushed well beyond Spinoza’s own political theory, which was not utopian. Yet, Hess’s description of this new society harkens back to Spinoza’s description of Israelite commonwealth in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. Indeed, throughout the *Holy History* Hess suggested that the Israelite commonwealth already contained a number of features that would emerge in the society of the future. “The Jews did not know a distinction between religious and political commandments, between what is due to God and what is due to Caesar,” Hess wrote. “These and other distinctions disappeared in the face of the one Law, which did not care for the body or the spirit alone, but for both” (*HH*, 92). The Law aimed at social unity and equality by placing restrictions on inheritances and redistributing property.

In *The Holy History*, the ancient Israelite commonwealth served as a model for the future socialist society, a society which will be marked by new unity of the spiritual and the political. Hess found his social vision articulated in ancient Judaism, not in Christianity, which followed Judaism but erred in separating religion from politics. The new society would achieve what the Israelite commonwealth had striven for: “Religion and politics will once again become one Whole, church and state will again permeate each other” (*HH*, 94). Into such a society, the Jews would finally assimilate. They would not persist as a distinctive national or religious community. The coming constitution would be the perfection of Judaism and its overcoming.

By the time he composed *Rome and Jerusalem*, Hess had reconsidered his youthful hopes for the overcoming of Judaism in a universal society. Now, he recognized the irreducibility of nations. The leading idea that courses through *Rome and Jerusalem* is that the Jews are a nation, and will remain so. For Hess, this fact was self-evident, but the trend in nineteenth century German Judaism was to deny the national character of the Jewish people and to proclaim Judaism a mere “confession.” Such a denial was, in Hess’s view, nothing less than a tragic error, and the task of his treatise was to illuminate and correct this misapprehension.

The structure of the Jewish religion, in his view, is a product of the Jewish national consciousness. Judaism is not a mere religion, divorced from the reality of social life (as is Christianity). Rather, Judaism reflects in religious forms the particular *national* characteristics of the Jewish people, its innate understanding of the world, its familial feeling and feminine compassion, its particular social outlook as well as its humanitarianism. Judaism has a “natural” basis from which its future will emerge (*RJ*, 101). Judaism has not been completed; its teaching will continue to develop: “It has always kept on developing, its development being based upon the harmonizing of the Jewish genius with that of life and humanity” (*RJ*, 97).

Yet, even as he turned to Jewish nationalism, Hess retained his Spinozist outlook. Harking back to his earlier writing, Hess loudly proclaimed Spinoza as Judaism’s latest and greatest prophet. Through his rather idiosyncratic reading of the Sage of Amsterdam, Hess expounded a Judaism whose cardinal principle, indeed, its “sole dogma,” was the idea of unity of all being, the unity of the spiritual and the material (*RJ*, 48). By emphasizing “monotheism,” the idea of “the unity of the creative spirit” (*RJ*, 214f), Hess

tried to retain, in a somewhat vague form, a metaphysical or “theological” concept at the core of Jewishness, which Spinoza had articulated in a modern and scientific manner. Spinoza represents the spirit; Spinozism is “the latest manifestation of Judaism” (*RJ*, 119f). Moreover, Hess maintained that “the present great epoch in universal history had its first manifestation ... in the teachings of Spinoza” (*RJ*, 75). Thus, Judaism and the coming epoch of world history are closely bound together. Judaism is disclosed as *the religion of the future*.

This idea of the unity of being had clear social and political ramifications. Here, too, Hess continued to be deeply influenced by Spinoza’s description of Judaism in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. As we have seen, Spinoza described the Jewish religion as a form of patriotism in which laws and rituals reinforced social solidarity and respect for the state. As Hess put it, “Spinoza conceived Judaism to be grounded in Nationalism, and held that the restoration of the Jewish kingdom depends entirely on the will and courage of the Jewish people” (*RJ*, 64).

But while Hess accepted Spinoza’s politicized portrayal of the Jewish religion, he drew from it radically different conclusions. Hess stressed that during the exile it has served to preserve a distinctive Jewish identity and character. He therefore took issue with Spinoza’s assessment of the value of this identity and his assumption that the Jews could assimilate into other states without difficulty, if a society permitted them. Moreover, Spinoza had argued that nations lacked innate qualities; their moral or cultural character was a consequence of social formation, laws and customs. By contrast, Hess maintained the existence of particular national characteristics rooted in blood (on Hess’ use of the terms “race” and “nation” in *RJ*, see Avineri, 201ff). The Jews, he believed,

were marked by certain indelible characteristics, which could be weakened or denied but not destroyed. Therefore, complete assimilation into another national body was impossible, and the attempt on the part of the Jews to assimilate by denying their nationality, treasonous.

Since Hess rejected the very possibility of assimilation, and, as a radical, did not see a future in a stubborn clinging to Jewish orthodoxy in a modernizing and increasingly nationalistic Europe, the solution to the Jewish problem had to be found elsewhere. Citing Spinoza's aside in the third chapter of the *Theological-Political Treatise* that the Jews could reestablish their state, Hess proclaimed that the answer was national renaissance. Here Hess advanced as policy what Spinoza had raised as mere speculation. In doing so, Hess made a nod to Spinoza's suggestion the restoration of a Jewish polity would depend on "manliness." In Hess' formulation, Spinoza had proposed that a reestablishment of a Jewish polity depends solely on the Jews' "will and courage" (*RJ*, 64).

But whereas Spinoza indicated that a Jewish political revival was doubtful, given the deleterious effect the Jewish law has had on the "will and courage" of the Jews, Hess alleged that the Jewish religion had indeed functioned to preserve the sentiments of patriotism, whose flames could be stoked again, igniting the passions necessary for the restoration of an active political will. Throughout the time of exile, the Jews had been sustained by hopes of national restoration and the passionate reverence they maintained for their homeland. Rabbinical Judaism, Hess maintained, had served to preserve the Jewish nation during their centuries of exile, and in his opinion it was still doing so. Rather than weakening the national spirit, the Jewish religion maintained and

strengthened it. “I know of only one Jewish fellowship [*Genossenschaft*],” Hess wrote, “the ancient Synagogue, which is fortunately still in existence, and will, I hope, exist until the national regeneration of world Jewry” (*RJ*, 99).⁶ Until that time, traditional Judaism would be necessary to maintain the Jewish spirit and solidarity.

But does such a Judaism promote national exclusivity and particularity? In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza had asserted that the Jewish religion promoted exclusivity and hatred for the gentile nations, which accounted for the persistence of the Jews after the loss of their state. Hess countered that theirs was not an insular nationalism, fueled by hatred, but a nationalism that opened up to the idea of humanity. That is, Judaism promoted a prophetic universalism *by means of* its particularistic nationalism. In contrast to Liberal Jews who claimed that the Jews were no longer a nation and that Jewish universalism was the consequence of their theology of ethical monotheism, Hess argued that humanitarianism flowed from the *national* essence of Judaism—from their intimate love of family ushers forth the love of all people.

Hess’s call for a renewed Jewish nationalism and his humanistic aspirations were therefore not mutually exclusive endeavors; the one served as the presupposition for the other. This is because, for Hess, nations are natural entities, each endowed with a special character and particular role to play on the stage of history. The goal of world history would be a united humanity, but it would be a humanity constituted by nations, not by their abolition or sublation into a universal class. Progress will not occur by suppression of national differences, but rather through regeneration of historical nations and abolition

⁶ I have modified the translation somewhat. This comment is followed by the qualification: “I myself, if I had a family, would, in spite of my dogmatic heterodoxy, not only join an orthodox synagogue, but would also observe in my house all feast and fast days, so as to keep alive in my heart and in the heart of my children, the traditions of my people. If I had influence in the synagogue, I would endeavor to beautify the religious worship.”

of race dominance. In Hess's view, progress depends upon the liberation of the Jews—as well as other oppressed nations—their revitalization and their integration into the family of nations. Only then can a true humanity be achieved.

In his descriptions of Judaism in both *Rome and Jerusalem* and *The Holy History of Mankind*, Hess turned the traditional Christian attack on Judaism on its head. Jewish “this-worldliness” is its virtue. Judaism does not lose itself in spiritual abstractions, but perceives spirit in life and body itself. Because its foundation is the idea of unity, Judaism cannot posit that fatal dualism between spirit and matter which Christianity falsely teaches. With its emphasis on the otherworldly salvation of the individual, Christianity reveals itself as the religion of egoism, of individual self-interest. In doing so, Christianity has extracted the individual out of his natural social environment. The Christian religion has created a church made of individuals seeking their own salvation, but in doing so has destroyed natural human solidarity. Because it is not bonded to the vital reality of a nation of flesh and blood, but rather had to be grafted onto the corpses of the nations of antiquity, Christian universalism is finally only a false and empty universalism. Hess admits that Christianity had served a historical purpose, “but its light only revealed the graves of the nations of antiquity.” It is “a religion of death, the function of which ceased the moment the nations reawakened into life.... Christianity and Islam are both only inscriptions on the tombstones which barbaric oppression erected upon the grave of weaker peoples” (*RJ*, 76).

Judaism, by contrast, is the true religion of communal solidarity. This, Hess maintained, is evidenced not only by the Jewish theological idea but also by the Jews' deep bonds of family love. The idea of immortality as Jewish continuity emerges from

this love, and not from selfish egoism. “Judaism has never drawn any line of separation between the individual and the family, the family and the nation, the nation and humanity as a whole, nor between creation and the Creator,” Hess proclaimed. “Judaism has no other dogma but the teaching of Unity” (*RJ*, 48).⁷

This Jewish idea of unity is so strong and so central to Judaism that it did not allow spiritualistic or materialistic sects to take root in its midst: “it is this Monism of Jewish life which acts as an antidote against modern materialism, which is the reverse side of Christian spiritualism.” Now, in contrast to Spinoza, Hess argued that this “Monism” is not apprehended by pure thought, but is a manifestation of “the mental activity of the race,” a notion Spinoza would undoubtedly have rejected (*RJ*, 84).

For Hess, however, it is the racial genius which creates the particular life-form of the people and which shapes its religion and its social and political institutions. The case of Judaism is remarkable for its unique fusion of political, religious, economic and social life. This “national-humanitarian essence of the Jewish historical religion is the germ out of which future social creations will spring forth” (*RJ*, 101). Thus, while orthodoxy was necessary to maintain Jewish identity and solidarity during the exile, national rejuvenation would allow for the emergence of a new constitution:

The rigid forms of orthodoxy, the existence of which was justified before the century of rebirth, will naturally, through the productive power of the national idea and the historical cult, relax and become fertile. It is only with the national rebirth that the religious genius of the Jews, like the giant of legend touching mother earth, will be endowed with new strength and again be re-inspired with the prophetic spirit. No aspirant for enlightenment, not even a Mendelssohn, has so far succeeded in crushing the hard shell with which Rabbinism has encrusted Judaism without, at the

⁷ However, later in the text, Hess maintained that “the divine teaching of Judaism was never, at any time, completed and finished. It has always kept on developing, its development being based upon the harmonizing of the Jewish genius with that of life and humanity” (*RJ*, 97).

same time, destroying the national idea in its innermost essence (*RJ*, 77; cf. 142ff, 162).

The contemporary crisis of Christianity results from the contradiction between the Christian religion and the spirit of the nations in which it exists. Christianity took over the defeated nations of antiquity, but in doing so forced them to give up their unique national lives. In modern times, the tension between Christian universalism and a reinvigorated national spirit was at last becoming acute. Judaism, however, does not foster this contradiction between spiritual and national existence: “Judaism is not threatened, like Christianity, with danger from the nationalistic and humanistic aspirations of our times, for in reality, these sentiments belong to the very essence of Judaism” (*RJ*, 96ff).

The Delusion of Emancipation and the Scandal of Reform

Since Hess’ purpose was to sponsor a Jewish national *Risorgimento*, *Rome and Jerusalem* contained a sustained and angry polemic against Liberal Judaism. Hess was particularly incensed by the attempt to efface that “national core” of Judaism. The reformers’ denial of the reality of Jewish nation undermined the very basis of Judaism; the “new” Jew which Reform has tried to create—solely “for the purposes of obtaining equal rights”—“is not only a deserter in the religious sense, but is also a traitor to his people, his race, and even to his family (*RJ*, 64, 62). While Mendelssohn intended only a minor “aesthetic” reform of the tradition, the nineteenth century reformers had “attempted to reform the basis itself” (*RJ*, 95). In Hess’s opinion, Liberal Jews, in their desire to modernize Judaism, had mistakenly turned to a Christian model of religion—a religion divorced from social and national reality—even as Christianity itself was showing signs of decay and exhaustion! “The efforts of our German Jewish religious

reform tended to the conversion of our national and humanitarian Judaism into a second Christianity cut after a rationalistic pattern, at a time when Christianity itself was already in a state of disintegration” (*RJ*, 96). While Jewish reformers sought to make Judaism more respectable in Germany by making it like Christianity, Hess argued that this attempt to refashion Judaism for the sake of the gentiles was in vain, for it failed to recognize that the “Jewish problem” was not about Judaism as a religion. The persistence of the “Jewish problem” was a result of a hatred of the Jews themselves. The Germans, Hess boldly stated, are constitutionally “Jew haters.” They are an abstract and theoretical race, in contrast to grounded, practical Jews. Jewish Reform is oblivious to the truth of the matter: first, by denying the national *basis* of Judaism, and second, by failing to recognize that German *Judenhass* is not hatred of Judaism as a religion but of the Jews as a *race*. Germans, Hess famously proclaimed, do not hate the Jewish religion so much as Jewish noses (*RJ*, 96).

Liberal Jews were therefore establishing for themselves a situation of even greater abnormality than the exile itself. The denial of nationality forced the modern Jew into a false and unstable position, for despite his protests to the contrary, the Jew would always be regarded by his non-Jewish neighbor as a foreigner. The Jew may “reform” his religion; he may be “tolerated”; he may be granted political rights; but he will never convince the gentiles of “his total separation from his own nationality.” In short, he will never be “respected.” “It is not the old-type, pious Jew, who would rather suffer than deny his nationality, that is most despised, but the modern Jew who ... denies his nationality, while the hand of fate presses upon his own people.” Such Jews place the principle of *ubi bene ibi patria* above their “great national memories” (*RJ*, 74). In coming

to this diagnosis, Hess rejected Spinoza's optimism regarding the eventual assimilation of the Jews. Even without a commitment to the Law, the Jew would be marked as foreign, separate and abhorrent.

Hess also rejected the Liberal Jewish idea of the "mission of Israel." This doctrine shifted the focus of Jewish duty from legal duties toward God to an ethical duty to educate humanity. Israel's world-historic role was to sponsor an ethical vision that had universal validity, its mission to be the bearer of the prophetic God-idea, to proclaim it *to* all the nations, *through* all the nations. The particularity of the Jewish people was to be maintained for the sake of its universal mission. Endowed with such a mission, the exile lost its tragic character. In fact, it was no longer conceived as exile at all, for the classical hope for a reestablishment of a Jewish state was transferred to desire for the completion of the process of emancipation and the hope for the realization of a redemption within the nations and within history. Dispersion among the nations was not to be explained as punishment for sin; rather, it was rather the very condition for the ethical-religious task. Liberal Judaism thus brought the eschatological horizon over into history through human agency. The Jew, as bearer of the idea of ethical monotheism, was finally disclosed as the true historical subject, teaching the gentiles pure monotheism, morality, tolerance, and humanity.

Hess countered that a mission of enlightenment did not belong exclusively to the Jews, and, moreover, if the mission is enlightenment, the means is not a Liberal Judaism but rather the dissolution of all religion:

It is better for the Jew who does not believe in the national regeneration of his people, to labor, like the enlightened Christian, for the dissolution of his religion. I understand how one can hold such an opinion. But what I do not understand is how it is possible to believe simultaneously in

“enlightenment” and in a Jewish Mission in exile [*Beruf des Judentums in der Zerstreung*]; in other words, in the ultimate dissolution and in the continued existence of Judaism at the same time (*RJ*, 177).

In his critique of Liberal Judaism, Hess contested the very premise of Emancipation—that the Jews will be incorporated into modern society, not as members of the Jewish *nation*, but as individual Jews, and that Judaism was not a form of politics.

The Liberal Jewish attempt to depoliticize Judaism and to integrate as individuals was, for Hess, impossible. On the one hand, this attempt required a denial of the essence of Judaism; Liberal Jews were really preaching a form of Jewish Protestantism. So Emancipation promised only a false bargain. Because it corrupted the very ground of Jewishness, it offered citizenship only at the price of treason. Rather than pursuing their “mission,” these Jews have rendered themselves impotent and were renouncing their true mission. “As long as Jews misconceive the essence of the spirit of modern times, which was originally their own spirit, they will only be dragged along involuntarily by the current of modern history, but will not participate in its making” (*RJ*, 101).

On the other hand, the program of integration qua individual was revealing itself to be unfeasible. The “neutral” liberal society that such emancipation presupposed had not emerged. What had come about was a world of distinct “nations,” and of increasing racial antipathy and class divisions. Emancipation therefore could not be the solution to the “Jewish question,” for it merely altered the physiognomy of the problem, confusing the issues and exacerbating the tensions. If the Jewish question was to be dealt with adequately, it would have to be done so on its proper basis, as a national problem, not as a matter of discrete individuals. And here Hess found his solution in Spinoza’s “messianic” suggestion.

The Jewish Society and the Messianic Epoch

Hess had begun his career as a radical provocateur, and even as he turned to advocate Jewish nationalism he did not lose his concern for and his faith in the future of humanity. Even as he argued for a Jewish national renaissance he proclaimed his hope for a “future Messianic epoch,” the perfection of humanity, an epoch already prefigured in the institution of the biblical Sabbath, which Hess described as a symbol of perfection of nature. Traditional Jewish messianism served as the Sabbath of history’s “symbolic expressions” (*RJ*, 132, 138). With Spinoza’s philosophy and the French revolution, the first rays of this new dispensation were beginning to gleam:

Today, during the spring equinox of humanity, will the glorious future to which we strive be heralded by movements in Judaism. ... Already at the beginning of the modern period, a Messianic movement, such as never occurred since the destruction of the Jewish State at the time of Bar Kochba, took hold of Eastern as well as Occidental Jews, a movement the false prophet of which was Sabbatai Zevi, but whose true prophet was Spinoza. Our modern Sadducees, Pharisees and Essenes, also—I mean the reformers, the rabbinites and the Chasidim—will disappear from Jewish history after the crisis has passed, the last crisis in universal history, when all the nations, and with them the Jewish people, will have awakened to a new life (*RJ*, 83f).

The revitalization of Jewish nationality and the achievement of the unity of life required the return of the Jews to their own land, the dissolution of inner-Jewish conflicts, and the establishment of new social institutions. In order to produce its spiritual and material goods, the nation needed to be rooted in its own soil. Only in Palestine could such a new Jewish society emerge and could the Jews “participate in the great historical movement of present-day humanity” (*RJ*, 167). The Jewish religion had served through the centuries of exile to keep the memory of the homeland alive and national solidarity intact. Now, however, the time was ripe for national rebirth. The rise of nationalist consciousnesses, modern technology, and the imperial power of France were producing

the conditions that made this rebirth feasible. Hess stressed the Jewish revival would serve a larger cause: “You should be the bearers of civilization to the primitive people of Asia, and the teachers of the European sciences to which your race has contributed so much. You should be the mediators between Europe and far Asia, open the roads that lead to India and China...” (*RJ*, 157).

Hess predicted that not all Jews would be convinced to leave their homes and to immigrate to Palestine. The Jews of Western Europe, having grown accustomed to European culture and having successfully broken their relations with their eastern brethren, would not choose to leave their homes. However, with the budding of their national consciousness they could be persuaded to aid the endeavor with funds and diplomatic support. Hess envisioned that the Jewish vanguard would be drawn from Eastern Europe, and that the new society would be a mixture of Eastern European and Oriental Jews. (He predicted—and encouraged—the development of Arab nationalism as well.) The process of immigration would take time and coordination, but it could be helped along with French support. The French, Hess believed, were the Jews’ natural allies. Their current venture of building of the Suez Canal would require the shoring up of French settlements in the area. Jewish immigration would therefore be desirable. Such an alliance between the French and the Jews would not be merely pragmatic; it would be a union based on shared political ideals.

This new society in Palestine would be established according to Jewish values—upon “Mosaic, i.e. social principles”—an organic socialism grounded in family ties and national feelings (*RJ*, 172; see also “Mein Messiasglaube,” in *Jüdische Schriften*). Through the establishment of such a society, the Jewish nation could work towards the

fulfillment of its true mission. Like the Jewish *Wissenschaft* historians, Hess proudly displayed how the spirit of Judaism pervaded Western culture and intellectual history. “It is through Judaism that the history of humanity became a sacred history,” he proclaimed, echoing a sentiment from his first book (*RJ*, 120). With the creation of a Jewish settlement in Palestine, a regenerated Jewish nation would stand beside the great nations of Europe and the United States as a spiritual force of the future. Like the Liberal Jews, Hess envisioned for the Jews not just a place in world history, but the central place.

For Spinoza, the future of the Jews would be a future *post-Judaism*, the overcoming of Judaism into a new theological-political situation. Though he considered Spinoza to be the prophet of the future, Hess did not hope for an overcoming of Judaism in modernity, but for its fulfillment. The Law, which serves the practical function of maintaining Jewish national solidarity, should therefore be respected, until the Jewish nation is once again rooted in its own soil. At that time, a new Jewish constitution could be established.

Rome and Jerusalem was an untimely text. Liberal Jews were scandalized by Hess’s attack and his seemingly reactionary political claim.⁸ In his own lifetime, Hess’s book was little read and was soon forgotten. Yet, Hess’s creative appropriation of Spinoza resulted in a novel way about thinking about the relation between Judaism and modernity. With Spinoza, Hess was able to construct a Jewish counter-tradition, a unique synthesis of theology, nationalism and socialist politics, a political messianism. It was not the first “modern, secular Jew” that Hess celebrated, but the prophet who best articulated the essence of Judaism as a religious society and its place in the modern world. In this

⁸ On the contemporary reaction to *Rom und Jerusalem*, see Israel Cohen, “Moses Hess: Rebel and Prophet,” 51f.

sense, Moses Hess proved himself different from those who considered the Sage of Amsterdam to be an enemy of the Jewish people, the harbinger of secular Jewish identity, or the prophet of a secular Jewish state.

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