

# SPINOZA AND THE BIBLE

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*As a Jew, Spinoza had to raise a somewhat different set of questions than Hobbes and Locke. While the questions of the latter grew out of their lives safely ensconced in the relatively homogeneous majority of their own land and led to the development of the idea of civil society, Spinoza, a Jew seeking admission to the larger society from which he was excluded, provided the intellectual basis for liberal democracy. The first modern secular Jew, he championed the separation of religion and state and the development of a basically secular society in which Jews, Christians, and others could be accepted without regard to their religious or ethnic ancestry. To foster his goal he had to confront the Bible and either refute its claims or render them unimportant to civil society. The most knowledgeable of the seventeenth century philosophers when it came to Scripture because of the Jewish education of his childhood, he "invented" modern biblical criticism. While he attacked biblical covenantalism and the special status of the biblical Jewish polity in the Christian West, he, too, felt the necessity to rely upon the idea of a political covenant or compact to establish the political order because of the necessity for human consent, although he played the matter down as much as he could. He also took a very realistic view of rights, essentially that humans have the right to do whatever they have the power to do. Morality, for Spinoza, is founded on consent and covenant which have federal and constitutional implications for him.*

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*Spinoza discusses religion in a paradoxical way. He discusses the fundamentals of religion as the Jewish tradition reflects them, but because he writes in Latin, they come out in the language of the Christian tradition and his original thoughts must be excavated from within them. Because he became the philosopher that most attracted modern emancipated Jews, much of his language as well as his ideas entered the modern Jewish lexicon and had to be overcome in postmodern Jewish thought. Ultimately, Spinoza's understanding of the essence of religion played a bridging function into modernity, based upon Hebrew and biblical ideas and norms, recognizing that for most people religion was politically necessary and perhaps even absolutely necessary, even if not rationally true. Like Hobbes and Locke, he grounded his thought in a very realistic psychology, one that made no fundamental moral demands on humanity other than those perceived to be in their self-interest. It was to take 300 years for the consequences of that approach to be fully felt in the world.*

## **Spinoza and Secular Liberal Civil Society**

Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza (1632-1677), like Hobbes and Locke, came out of a covenantal tradition, but, in his case, in its original Jewish version. Because of that, Spinoza was both more deeply conversant with its biblical roots and more leery of its possible application to the world in which he lived. A Jew from Amsterdam, his parents were Marranos who had escaped from the Iberian Peninsula, where the family had been forced to convert to Catholicism over a century earlier and had to preserve their Judaism secretly. Not surprisingly, without rejecting the spirit of the times, Spinoza asked a somewhat different set of questions tied to his search, as a Jew, for admission to the Christian world around him.

The Reformed Protestant Netherlands in Spinoza's day was a haven for persecuted Jews, reflecting the Dutch revolt against Spain and Catholicism both. Holland, indeed, was the first state in Western Europe to admit Jews to equal status and to develop a multi-religious society based civic principles. Indeed, the ruling authorities, who were themselves Calvinists, were more tolerant toward Jews than they were to the Christian Arminians in their midst. The latter, as advocates of a non-Calvinist Re-

formed Protestant theology, were considered heretics by the regime, while the Jews were just of a different religion.

Spinoza was an early "convert" from Judaism to philosophy; that is to say, he recognized that Judaism as a religion and the religions that grew out of it were based on Divine revelation, which he rejected as the foundation for human knowledge, while philosophy was based on reason, the foundation he sought for himself and for others. A belief in reason as against revelation served Spinoza's political purposes as well, since in principle it opened the door to establishing political society on strictly civil (as distinct from religious) principles, thereby making it possible for Jews and Christians to be equally citizens, one of Spinoza's major aspirations. In that sense, Spinoza was the first modern Jew, certainly the first modern Jewish philosopher, who sought to rebuild European society on modern principles. To do so required secularization of society, a detachment of state and religion: i.e., the end of the Christian commonwealth, either in its universalist Catholic dimension or its particularistic Protestant one.

In Spinoza's lifetime, the first steps in the detachment of religion and state took place in the larger society in order to conclude the Reformation-initiated wars of religion. These wars had lasted for four generations and had exhausted Western Europe. The cessation of hostilities was embodied in the Treaty of Westphalia between the Holy Roman Empire and its members, France, and Sweden in 1648. By its terms, religion remained established in every polity but was removed as a legitimate reason for interstate wars in Europe. Spinoza was engaged in the parallel construction of a philosophic rationale for all of this.

In order to construct that rationale, Spinoza had to discredit the Bible as the most important source of political ideas. The Reformation had restored the Bible to that position, which earlier it had had to share with Classical philosophy. Therefore, Spinoza's greatest political work, the *Tractatus Theologicus Politicus*, is, in the main, an effort to demonstrate that biblical political teaching was valid only for the ancient Israelites and their commonwealth, and had no intrinsic validity for any other people. Combined with his other purpose, namely, the grounding of civil society in religious neutrality for the sake of promot-

ing the possibility of religious pluralism or, better, secularism within it, this inevitably led to a denigration of the covenantal dimension in his writings.

All of the major political philosophers of the seventeenth century devoted major parts of their political works to the problem of the Bible and how to confront it through the new political philosophy. That in itself is testimony as to how important the Bible was in the political thought of their day. All of them were in some respects able to rely on the Bible as a support for their rejection of Classical political thought. All had to denigrate and diminish the authority of the Bible in some respects for the sake of other aspects of their modern political thought.

The Bible provided excellent support for their argument that human nature derived from human psychology, from the real nature of man rather than the ideal. Yet the Bible also commanded men to follow God in the search for the improvement of the weaknesses in their nature, something that the political philosophers wanted to achieve through human agency alone (despite the best protestations of piety made necessary by the times). Spinoza was certainly no less of this school than Hobbes or Locke and indeed may have been more so since he had to discredit the Bible in the eyes of Jews as well as Christians.

Like Hobbes, Spinoza begins with a realistic view of human nature as a bundle of passions and interests, more often base than noble. Reading his *Political Tractate*, in which he summarizes his understandings of human nature and politics, one senses that in writing it, he must have recalled the famous Talmudic dictum of Rabbi Hanina: "Pray for the welfare of the government, for if not for awe of it ever man would swallow his neighbor alive."<sup>1</sup> Thus he erects his politics on a realistic psychology.

Spinoza seems to accept the prevailing view in his circles that the polity is founded on a political compact, a view no doubt as much influenced by the political understanding of the Reformed Protestant Dutch as Hobbes was influenced by regnant Puritan thought in England, and both religious ideologies were influenced by the Bible, a direct influence on Spinoza himself. Nevertheless, Spinoza seems to view human linkage as more natural and the compact more a matter of political organization

than the establishment of society itself. Here, too, he is true to his Jewish background, which views living in society as what we might call a natural arrangement rather than a conventional one, and is much less radically individualistic than his English counterparts. All told, however, he pays little attention to the origins of civil society, focusing more on its organization for human protection and advancement.

Nevertheless, Spinoza, too, felt the necessity to rely upon the idea of a political covenant, compact, or contract to establish the political order. Although he played down the idea of an original document to establish social connections among individuals in families, viewing those as natural, he did indicate acceptance of the idea that a political covenant or compact was needed to establish what he already termed "the state" in the manner of continental European thought. The state could offer the advantages of civil society that Spinoza held to be vitally necessary, feeling the need for those responsible for the maintenance of order to have coercive powers at their disposal to do so.

While Spinoza does not emphasize the role of covenant in his direct discussions of the subject, in his discussion of the ancient Israelite polity he provides his readers with a teaching that enables them to fathom his concerns in this area. In doing so, he rests his ideas on Maimonides' political thought, which rests on the proposition that humans are naturally social and need society for their development, but they also are the least social of all living beings in their ways. In Maimonides' eyes, this is the basic contradiction facing government and politics. Spinoza agrees and goes a step further, holding that it is also the justification for democracy, to overcome this contradiction at least sufficiently to maintain political society.

Spinoza further holds that there is no natural morality, that what humans mean by "natural rights" are really the powers that they possess by nature; that is to say, whatever they can do, they have a natural right to do. This is a "Hobbesian" formulation if there ever was one. For Spinoza, as for Hobbes, this makes it absolutely necessary for human beings to establish covenants and compacts through which they will relinquish some portion of their rights, that is to say, their powers, to a collectivity, the polity and its rulers.

Spinoza further understands that in order to achieve this, humans must consent to doing so. He goes further. The need for this consent is not just for a founding consensual act but it must be a continuing consensus, with continuing ways and means for people to affirm their consent and to understand that they are doing so. It may be that this, too, comes from Spinoza's background in the Jewish tradition. Judaism provides numerous acts of renewing consent, from daily prayers, three times a day, to annual reaffirmation on Shavuot (Pentacost), the traditional anniversary of the giving of the Torah at Sinai.

Moreover, there are limits to humans' ability to relinquish their rights or powers. Those limits are also natural. They cannot limit their powers beyond what nature will allow. So, for example, it is impossible to relinquish the right to one's thoughts. Even the meanest (in the sense of lowest and most miserable) human being can and will think about what is good for him and there is no way to make him relinquish or to limit that power of thought, even by his own consent.

Thus, for Spinoza, morality is founded on consent and through covenanting. The federal and constitutional implications of his ideas are present within those ideas and are recognizable upon contemplation of them. That is to say, were one-time consent all that was needed, one would not need constitutions and constitutionalism. Constitutions provide the basis for continuing consent by establishing the principles and providing the ways and means to translate them into practice through popular consent. In this way Spinoza lays a philosophic grounding for modern constitutional republicanism.

Spinoza seeks consent through people consenting with one another, but it is equally possible, as he himself admits, to do so in the biblical manner, that is, through people consenting to a covenant with God, who thereby establishes the constitution for them that meets the same criteria. The morality established by those covenants and constitutions is a federal morality in the original sense of the term "federal"; that is to say, it is based upon covenant and does not have, nor can it have, any other basis than covenant and consent. Others have argued that there must be a natural morality, that is to say, a moral order built into nature in order to have covenants; that is to say, there have to be people who are naturally moral, or morally capable, and who

seek to establish that morality for larger publics or for humanity as a whole on that basis through covenant. Spinoza would not agree.

Nor would the Bible. In it, God is the source for establishing covenantal morality, i.e., He provides the moral principles to which people agree by covenant. People may be naturally free, but, once they are covenanted, their freedom consists of being free to live up to the terms of their covenants. Otherwise they are outside the law or outlaws. Spinoza recognizes this by allowing governments greater power of coercion in the public sphere than they would otherwise be entitled to, in order to maintain public order in civil society.

Since Spinoza wrote in Latin, the word that he uses to describe this process of consenting is "obey." People obey authority, whether governments or pacts or God. Read carefully, however, one sees that the term that Spinoza has in mind is not the Latin word for obedience but the biblical Hebrew word for hearkening, *shamoa*, which means to hear and to act accordingly, implying an intermediate act of choice and consent (or what Alexander Hamilton later referred to in *Federalist No. 1* as "reflection and choice").<sup>2</sup> Coming as he did out of the Jewish tradition and its biblically-based political ideas and culture, Spinoza thought of the act of what Christians call obedience as a matter of hearkening. Even though he rejected what for him were the limitations of that tradition, he retained the imprint of its culture on his thought.

In this way, too, he served a bridging function, reintroducing the biblical political tradition grounded in covenant into a modern, secularizing world in such a way that it did not immediately rest upon God's providence and thus could be translated into modern terms. The requirement that there be continuing consent further served to open the door to modern constitutionalism as the vehicle for assuring that continuing consent. While Spinoza saw himself as secular, his resynthesis of biblical and classic political thought also contributed to making it possible for both modern Jews and modern Christians to rest their thinking on the base that he provided.

In the last analysis, Spinoza is unfair to the idea of covenant because he is so close to it. He alone of the great philosophers of his time had a direct experience with the original covenantal

tradition, that of the Bible and the Jewish people. For reasons of personal preference, he rejected that tradition, probably as overly religious, and attempted with no little success to found a new, more secular, tradition in its place.

The first modern Jew, he was a major architect of the new political philosophy because, even more than Hobbes needed security in England, Spinoza needed acceptance in the larger world. In another sense, however, Spinoza invented a new covenant based on human moral commitment so as to be able to abandon the old tradition, presented by him as parochial, on behalf of the new one presented as universal. That was as much an act of covenanting as any other that took place in the seventeenth century.

Spinoza did serve, even if unintentionally, as one of the bridging figures between the older covenantal tradition and modernity. Like Hobbes and Locke, his careful treatment of the Bible to make his points gave his readers and subsequent generations a chance to do the same from a non-traditional perspective. Spinoza even shows them the necessity of confronting biblical political thought and with it the covenantal tradition.

Spinoza used the word "covenant" only in reference to its usage in the Bible as a theo-political term and was hardly an advocate of the use of the term. Moreover, his reluctance to emphasize the compact theory of politics and his apparent leaning toward a more organic view of the origins of civil society kept him from seeking any alternate term. Nevertheless, by taking the Bible seriously and in laying the foundations for modernity and modern democracy, Spinoza became an influence on subsequent generations of moderns. He did so because he wanted to make the world safe for philosophy or, more accurately, science and philosophy. Scientists and philosophers had to have lives that were both tranquil and unrestricted for science and philosophy. Both stability and freedom were prerequisites for doing that, and he saw democracy as providing both the most stable and the freest of regimes.

On the other hand, a very good case can be made that Spinoza thought that in matters of the polity and its governance, rulers did indeed have the right to apply restrictions if they were necessary for the survival and health of the polity, including fostering religious myths and political or social restrictions that,

while not necessarily true or just in the philosophic or scientific sense, were ultimately true in that they enabled civil society to survive. This Spinozistic approach was the one that actually took hold in the modern world and was sustained throughout most of the modern world wherever democracy took root until the end of the modern epoch. This, indeed, may have been his most practical contribution to the transformation of the covenantal tradition. Only the totalitarian polities whose rulers wanted to control everything or those polities that retained too much premodern character and did not become modern democracies did not follow Spinoza's lead.

Spinoza's understanding of the essence of religion played the same bridging function based upon Hebrew and biblical ideas and norms. While Spinoza himself may have denied the ultimate rational truth of religion and expressed that denial in his esoteric teaching, at the very least he understood that for most people in the world, even the generally enlightened public who molded opinion in the polity but who were not and would not ever be philosophers, religion was politically necessary and perhaps even absolutely necessary. As such, it was true even if not rationally true.<sup>3</sup>

Religion, for Spinoza, was the means for their moral salvation (*salus*). While he suggested that blessedness (*beatitudo*) is a higher form of salvation, candidates for achieving it are very few indeed. Therefore he did not continue his discussion of it. For moral salvation, then, people need religion, but they need the essence of religion, not its particularized accretions in particular cultures or communities. (Hence Spinoza could deny the validity of biblical laws for mankind in general on the grounds that they were designed for the Israelites, indeed, the ancient Israelites at that.)

What, then, is the essence of religion? The pursuit of justice (*justitia*) and charity (*caritas*). That pursuit is salvation for all but the tiny few who can be blessed.

Faith demands goodness rather than truth, but it is good and a means to salvation only because of the obedience which it inspires, and, consequently, that it is obedience alone which makes man a believer. Hence it is not necessarily the man who produces the best arguments who displays the best

faith, but he who produces the best works of justice and charity (TTP, ch. 14).

Indeed, Spinoza's fifth proposition of the universal faith is "worship of God and obedience to him consists solely in justice and charity (or love) toward one's neighbor."

Spinoza's parenthetical insertion gives us a very important clue to what he means by justice and charity and most particularly by charity or *caritas*. What we have before us is nothing other than the biblical Hebrew phrase *tzedakah v'hesed*: *tzedakah* as justice in the largest sense, and *hesed* as covenant love (following Snaith's translation), or as this writer would translate it, "loving covenantal obligation." Indeed, Spinoza, in elaborating on a definition of *caritas*, reaches the same definition.

So in the end Spinoza draws upon the Bible for the basic premises of universal religion but not that part of the Bible devoted to the detailed laws given by God and Moses to the Jewish people, but on the essence which God, Moses, and the prophets speak to the people on different occasions. Moreover, that essence is covenantal. Spinoza further defines what it means to be just as being obedient to God. If we correctly understand his understanding of obedience as hearkening, to be just is to hearken to God, i.e., to fulfill one's potential as a covenanted being. If charity for Spinoza indeed is *hesed*, then the second part of the phrase has to do with fulfilling one's obligations as a covenanted being toward one's fellows; or phrased more concisely, justice is essentially fulfilling one's covenantal obligations to God and charity, fulfilling those obligations to one's fellows.<sup>4</sup>

## The New Political Philosophy

The first steps toward the new science of politics were taken through the new political philosophy, the philosophic revolution brought by Hobbes, Spinoza, and Locke. All three were products of covenanted commonwealths and all three developed systems of political thought that moved people from covenanted commonwealths to their modern equivalents, constitutional civil societies. The new political philosophy began by

breaking with traditional conceptions of human nature which held that the good was as much a part of human nature as other elements and that humans would naturally strive for the good if circumstances permitted that side of human nature to flourish.

From a philosophic perspective, premodern theories saw natural law as overarching the entire human enterprise, built into the very foundations of humanity and including all of the ideal aspirations of humankind. This overarching character also was manifested in Christian theology which indeed was grounded in a synthesis between natural law and Divine revelation, first developed by the Jewish thinker Philo of Alexandria for Jews living at the time of Jesus. Subsequently, Jews and Muslims had relied less on the philosophically grounded natural law and much more on Divine law as the source of the good, but the end result was very much the same. It was easy enough for the Protestant reformers to go back to what, for them, was the Old Testament and still remain within an overarching system which believed that the good could be brought out in humans because it was within them by virtue of their very nature and/or by Divine grace.

It was this edifice that was demolished by the new political philosophy which held that the psychology of individual humans, grounded in human passions, provided the foundations for human nature, not some overarching system that included virtue; that humans had certain elemental rights by virtue of their being humans that could only be protected by the establishment of civil society, through which order could be maintained to protect the weak against the strong and strong individuals against the combination of many weak ones against them. Grounded in methodological individualism, this new political philosophy viewed individual human beings not only as the building blocks of the social order but as radically independent from one another except insofar as they chose to or felt the necessity to combine, which the political philosophers themselves believed they would inevitably do for sheer survival if for no other reason.

To effect their combination, the new political philosophers drew upon covenant ideas put forward by Reformed Protestantism, but in a secularized way. Hobbes, indeed, secularized the very term "covenant," apparently seeing within it the moral

dimension and the importance of that dimension to make covenants work in an otherwise highly individualistic world. Thus Hobbes, who has come down to us with a reputation as the most "pessimistic" of the new philosophers of the seventeenth century, actually rested his philosophy, especially in its political dimension, on relatively high moral expectations.

Spinoza and Locke, on the other hand, moved from the term "covenant" to "political compact" to highlight a morality based upon human mutuality rather than even a putative Divine connection. Of course, Hobbes had the same idea but thought that he could keep the term which so clearly expressed the moral dimension of pacting that he had in mind.

Despite this, however, covenant continued to mean a pact between humans and a transcendent power (until, for some, it later was transformed into the idea of a contract that was binding only morally and not legally enforceable — its meaning today in the business world). Spinoza, indeed, tries hard to avoid even discussing the matter, preferring to concentrate on other issues such as the rejection of revelation in favor of rational knowledge of natural right. One might argue that this could be understood as stemming from his particular background and the questions that it led him to raise. Those questions led him to be more interested in directly confronting the problem of Divine revelation and the necessity for its replacement by a system of rational philosophy than either Hobbes or Locke.

Locke was sufficiently a product of his late Puritan environment to seek to incorporate some of its major premises and methodologies into his new, more secularized, version of political philosophy. He felt the need to undermine Divine revelation only insofar as it seemed to protect the Divine right of patriarchal monarchy, which he did very thoroughly in his *First Treatise on Government* but which also was not very difficult, given the thrust of Scripture away from patriarchy in any case. For Locke, however, as in the Bible, humans organized themselves around morally grounded and reinforced pacts. God became, at most, a guarantor for those human pacts rather than a partner in them. With those developments in mind, Locke could then enlist much of Puritan political thought in his cause, albeit in secularized form.

What was common to all three of them was a very realistic psychology, one that made no moral demands on humanity other than those perceived to be in their self-interest. The full consequences of this shift would not be known for another three hundred years — until the tenth generation after its occurrence — when it became an agent of secularism as well as republicanism. While the latter is what particularly concerns us here, we cannot understand it unless we understand the former as well, for while all three and the lesser philosophic lights of the seventeenth century who travelled the same path preferred to refer to political society as a commonwealth, by the end of the century they had introduced the term “civil society” which added a new dimension to the commonwealth.

The idea of civil society explicitly or implicitly secularized the commonwealth in two ways, by grounding society in a civil rather than a Divine order, and by resting it on the private lives of individuals that were modified only by the agreement of those individuals to surrender some of their privately held power (which after all was authoritative in this view of the world) to one or another collectivity, either a public, non-governmental association or a far more binding governmental association that became the framing institution of civil society. Since both of these were private decisions to establish and maintain collectivities, the private was primary, even though for those philosophers the public domain was absolutely necessary for the protection of life, the advancement of liberty, the ownership of property, and the pursuit of happiness. For them, the commonwealth was no longer the Puritan commonwealth resting on Divine guidance defined and established by covenants, the original of which rested on human partnership with God, but was a civil society based upon political and social compacts, entered into by human beings with or without Divine protection on the basis of mutual pledges to be sustained by the power of the new collectivity derived from the moral commitments of the mutual pledging. The essence of covenanting was preserved but with a new grounding and more limited purposes.

## **The New Science of Politics**

This, in turn, led to the new science of politics. The process of translating the new political philosophy into effective institutions of government became the province of the exponents of the new science of politics. That took more time. By the end of the seventeenth century, the new political philosophy had already become the cutting edge if not the regnant philosophy for Western Europe and the British Isles in one form or another. It took longer for the new science of politics to make its mark, in practice, after the change in theory. Indeed, not until 1789, toward the end of the eighteenth century, could it be said to have done so.

The task of the new science of politics was multifaceted. Not only would it have to translate abstract theories of the origins and foundations of the polity into operational ones, but it had to secure sufficient penetration and spread of those theories among the publics who would have to make practical governing decisions. Those philosophic theories, once translated, became the cornerstones of eighteenth century theories of republicanism, revolution, liberty and equality, federalism and rights, *inter alia*.

To some extent those theories necessarily had to become ideologies, accessible in simpler form to wider circles of people. As such, they could begin to penetrate the political cultures of those same publics and at the same time influence the design of new institutions to make them operational. Those institutions, in time, had a profound effect on the political behavior of those who lived within them.

The key to the successful movement from the new political philosophy to the new science of politics was the idea and practice of constitutionalism, itself derived from the covenantal political tradition rather than from premodern European constitutionalism which rested on the old political philosophy and politics. Constitutionalism involved the translation and concretization of the ideas of the new political philosophy into the civil institutions of the new polity. Modern constitutionalism was essentially an eighteenth century invention, although echoes of it had appeared late in the seventeenth. It took another

century before it received its full embodiment in the Constitution of the United States of America.

Several things stood out as marking the new constitutionalism. One, it was limited, seeking only to frame governments for civil societies, unlike ancient constitutionalism which sought to construct the basic rules for comprehensive ways of life in religiously grounded commonwealths meant to be homogeneous with regard to beliefs and norms, and practices expressing both. Two, it was designed to protect the principles of the new political philosophy, especially those addressed to the issue of individual rights. Three, it was to draw its source of authority principally from the people it served. This was made manifest by directly involving the people in the writing and adoption of constitutions in a concrete expression of their sovereign powers. Four, it was to establish appropriate institutions for achieving the constitutional goals of the new political philosophy.

## Notes

1. *Pirkei Avot*, Perekh Gimmel, Mishna Bet.
2. *Federalist No. 1*. Hamilton refers to "reflection and choice" as the best or most correct means to establish a polity in contrast with force or "accident," the other ways which he emphasizes as having existed prior to the "new science of politics." Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, *The Federalist* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1961).
3. Douglas J. Den Uyl, "Power, Politics and Religion in Spinoza's Political Thought," *Jewish Political Studies Review*, Vol. 7, Nos. 1-2 (Spring 1995).
4. See Norman Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), on the covenant love of God; see also Den Uyl, *op. cit.*