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The Turn to Tradition in the Study of Jewish Politics

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Abstract

This article traces the political, intellectual, and disciplinary motivations behind the establishment of the field of Jewish political thought, and pursues implications of the field's establishment for the dynamics of Jewish political debate. Jewish political thought is decisively marked by the experience of statelessness. Thus, to establish the possibility of a Jewish political tradition, scholars have had to abandon or relax the received view that sovereignty is the defining horizon for politics. Although the pervasiveness of politics is the field's animating conviction, scholars have yet to mount a sufficiently forceful challenge to sovereignty's conceptual and political priority. This review surveys the reasons why scholars have been reluctant to pursue alternative, diasporic conceptions of the political, focusing on their notions of what constitutes a tradition. The article contends that developing a more ambitious conception of the Jewish political tradition is a prerequisite for encouraging political debate about sovereignty's importance for Jewish political agency.

INTRODUCTION

The academic field of Jewish political thought is relatively young, dating to the early 1980s. Jewish scholars, both inside and outside the academy, have long addressed political questions. Indeed, the question of whether Jews constitute a religion or a nation is arguably the defining controversy of modern Jewish thought and historiography (Batnitzky 2011, 2012). Yet only in the 1980s did scholars trained in political science and political theory feel compelled to establish a discrete academic field—with its attendant institutions (journals, conferences, undergraduate courses, think tanks)—dedicated to the study of Jewish politics and political thought. The intervening years have witnessed three large-scale, collaborative projects for the recovery of Jewish and Hebrew political traditions (Elazar 1980; Walzer et al. 2000, 2003; Schochet et al. 2008) as well as an increasing number of independent efforts. These groundbreaking initiatives have radically transformed the institutional landscape for the study of Jewish politics, creating something approximating a recognized academic speciality. In recent years, scholars of law and politics have produced some of the most sophisticated work in Jewish studies. As the vehemence of academic controversies surrounding Zionism intensifies, so does the field's urgency and cachet.

For all of the excitement that this work has generated within Jewish studies circles, it has yet to find a sizable audience among American political scientists. Although projects for the recovery of Jewish political traditions emerged simultaneously with efforts to found a subfield in comparative political theory, as I discuss below, these projects have been ignored by the subfield's proponents, who do not include Jewish thought under the comparativist rubric. In this review, I trace the political, intellectual, and disciplinary motivations for the field's establishment and pursue implications of the field's constitution for the dynamics of Jewish political debate.

One of the most striking aspects of the field's debut has been the palpable sense, on the part of the field's founders, that there is something improbable about the whole enterprise. When introducing the Jewish political tradition, scholars often begin by anticipating the reader's skepticism regarding whether such a tradition could possibly exist (Walzer et al. 2000, p. xxi). The fact that scholars continue to organize programmatic essays around the question, "Is there a Jewish political thought?" suggests an audience for whom the question remains controversial (Melamed 2005). The editors anticipate skepticism from readers raised with the conviction, axiomatic within traditions indebted to Hobbes, that there is no such thing as politics without sovereignty. Those who insist that sovereignty is a *sine qua non* for political community are liable to dismiss the idea of a "Jewish" (as opposed to a Hebrew or an Israeli) political tradition as incoherent, given that rabbinic Judaism developed in diaspora, under conditions of statelessness. Thus, to dispel readers' skepticism and affirm the tradition's existence, scholars have had to abandon, or at least relax, received conceptions of the political. Framed in this way, projects for the tradition's recovery invariably confront the question of sovereignty and its role as a defining horizon of the political. As Walzer (2012a, p. 124) puts it, the Jews' success at sustaining political community in diaspora "raises what is perhaps the central question of Jewish political thought: Just how important is sovereignty, independence, and authoritative direction? How important is it to have, like the other nations, kings of one's own, who appoint judges and fight wars?"

The study of Jewish politics could provide a unique avenue of approach to this question—which has assumed increasing urgency, in a globalizing world, for democratic theorists, sociologists, and students of international relations. Yet scholars in the field have yet to initiate a sufficiently rigorous interrogation of sovereignty's importance for sustaining political agency and empowerment. Although the field's founders expend immense energy and exhibit immense creativity teasing out political dynamics of diasporic communities, they appear disinclined to entertain radical

challenges, from within the tradition, to sovereignty's conceptual and political priority. This reluctance to dethrone sovereignty is a function, in part, of the founders' ideological commitment to state-centered Zionisms. Yet it also reflects an impoverished notion of what constitutes a tradition—and of the theoretical and political work that a tradition can perform. My main argument in this review is that a richer, more challenging conception of tradition could inspire renewed theoretical imagination about the institutions and practices that encourage Jewish political agency. Such imagination is key if the field is to realize its twofold promise—that of expanding the bounds of Jewish political discourse and that of expanding received conceptions of the political.

The first section below outlines the intellectual and political contexts from which the field emerged, showing how the move to constitute a scholarly field is bound up with the insistence on the existence of a Jewish political tradition. The second section examines the conceptions of tradition that animate the field's three most influential initiatives. Too often, scholars retreat from an ambitious conception of the Jewish tradition as a distinctive mode of political inquiry, opting instead to deploy traditional Jewish texts instrumentally, to bolster nontraditional ideologies. Adopting an instrumental, rather than a receptive, stance toward traditional texts insulates scholars from their most unsettling insights and practices. In the third section, I survey academic controversies surrounding Zionism that have emerged simultaneously with, but in isolation from, these collaborative recovery projects—controversies in which Jewish texts play a similar auxiliary role. To encourage a nuanced, historically informed examination of sovereignty's political importance, we must embrace a more ambitious vision of the theoretical significance of Jewish political traditions. Ideally, a field premised on the richness and variety of Jewish political experience should challenge the pervasive view that, after World War II, Jewish political horizons are exhausted by the choice between liberalism and political Zionism.

INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

It is hard to overstate the extent to which Zionism—the ideology, the movement, and the interpretation of Jewish history on which they rely—defines the intellectual and political contexts from which the field of Jewish political thought emerged. Systematic, large-scale projects for the recovery of a Jewish political tradition debuted in the 1980s and 1990s, at a time when pluralism, the limits of secularism, and the possibility of a comparative political theory were defining controversies for American political theorists. As we will see, the legitimacy of secular agency and Judaism's relationship to the West are among the central preoccupations of this nascent field. Yet, if American disciplinary currents fostered a hospitable atmosphere, internal Jewish debates provided the immediate provocation for the move to constitute a scholarly field. The field's sponsors generally identify the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 as the impetus for their initiatives. "The rebirth of Israel provides the Jewish people with a public arena where they themselves must take charge, drawing on the strength of their tradition to give a direction to political life and a content to popular aspiration" (Walzer et al. 2000, p. xiv). Yet, in the period prior to the state's establishment, when Zionism was one of several ideologies competing for Jewish allegiance, political theorists, historians, and rabbis had already made many of the interpretive moves that would become signatures of scholarship in the field.

As codified by Leo Strauss, the Western canon includes the few Jewish thinkers whose philosophical credentials he considers unimpeachable (i.e., Maimonides and Spinoza) (Strauss & Cropsey 1987). Indeed, some scholars (Melamed 2005) credit Strauss with pioneering the very notion of Jewish political thought, noting his claim, in *Philosophy and Law* (Strauss 1995 [1935]),

that medieval Jewish philosophy is essentially political. Strauss was pivotal in incorporating Jewish texts within the canon, and his influence continues to be felt in the study of medieval and Renaissance political philosophy (e.g., Melamed 2012). Although the earliest proponent of a Jewish political tradition, Daniel Elazar, acknowledges a debt to Strauss, Strauss' influence on the field's development is actually rather slight. Granted, Strauss takes the apparent insolubility of the Jewish problem as a point of departure for his entire research program (Strauss 1997). Yet Strauss does not venture a novel interpretation of Jewish political history, nor does he examine the prospects for Jewish political empowerment at any length. Rather, his central preoccupation, as a reader of Jewish texts, is the question of "orthodoxy," or the relationship between reason and revelation. The reason/revelation antithesis entrenches received notions of what counts as political thought— notions that exclude Judaism's foundational texts.

By contrast, the idea of a Jewish political tradition is inconceivable without the contributions of historians, who shattered the stereotype of diasporic Jewish passivity. As early as the 1890s, activist historians had credited institutions of communal governance with preserving Jewish national identity in diaspora (Rabinovitch 2012, 2014). From the 1920s onward, academic historians made similar moves—recovering medieval institutions of self-government, enumerating the costs of Emancipation, and rehabilitating Jewish political judgment—in response to a shifting constellation of political controversies. Salo Baron's famous critique of "the lachrymose theory" of Jewish history provides a rejoinder to Zionism and Reform Judaism, movements whose divergent political programs—nationalism versus assimilation—nevertheless presupposed a shared narrative of diasporic Jewish powerlessness (Baron 1928). In the 1970s and 1980s, historians mobilized similar arguments to counter accusations, attributed to Raul Hilberg and Hannah Arendt, that millennia of political passivity had rendered Jews incapable of resisting Nazi genocide (Schorsch 1976, Funkenstein 1991). Several years later, Biale (1986) took the "crisis" of Jewish ideology in the wake of Israel's first Lebanon war (in 1982) as the occasion for confronting, yet again, "the old conception of Jewish history bequeathed by the ideologies of the turn of the century" (p. 4). Tracking shifts in the perceived political purchase of this revisionist narrative, we witness the narrowing of Jewish political discourse after World War II. Writing in 1928, Baron used a reconsideration of medieval history to advocate a revival of Jewish communal autonomy, in the form of minority rights. By 1986, however, "Zionism and American pluralism" appear to be the only viable political options, and dilemmas surrounding the legitimacy of (Israeli) sovereign power consume scholarly debate (Biale 1986, p. 120).

Historians of the *kahal* (the semiautonomous self-governing unit of medieval Jewry) have long celebrated the political sophistication on display in rabbinic legal reasoning (Baer 1950, Agus 1952, Albeck 1960, Morell 1971). From the dawn of the 20th century, rabbis affiliated with religious Zionism worked to adapt legal categories that had justified the *kahal's* authority to the institutions of an anticipated Jewish state. These projects gained urgency after 1948, as scholars blended rabbinic reasoning with modern concepts (e.g., consent, representation) in an effort to justify the state's democratic institutions (Mittleman 2000, Kaye 2013). Thus, Isaac Herzog, Israel's first Ashkenazic chief rabbi, argued that "the possibility exists to create a constitution for a Jewish state and to establish a legal regime which will in no way contradict our holy Torah" (Herzog 1989, p. 1). Just as Herzog confronted questions with no precedent in the diasporic legal corpus (such as the appointment of non-Jewish judges), so Shlomo Goren, the chief military chaplain, faced the challenge of reviving long-dormant areas of *halachah* (Jewish law) (Edrei 2006–2007, Cohen 2007). This flurry of halachic inventiveness confirmed the vitality of rabbinic political thinking, but, in its traditionalist limitations, it also revealed the need to devise more theoretically sophisticated approaches to rabbinic literature.

Thus, some of the field's foundational premises—the agency of diasporic Jews, the vitality of rabbinic discourse—appear in longstanding controversies surrounding Zionism's relationship to diasporic Judaism. What sets recent work apart is the insistence, by scholars trained in political science and political theory, on the existence of a continuous but contested tradition. As we will see, the tradition's identity (Jewish or Hebrew?) and purview (biblical or rabbinic?) remain controversial.¹ Political theorists have asserted not only that a tradition exists, but that its recovery is imperative, requiring collaborative, multidisciplinary efforts. The partial realization of these disciplinary ambitions has transformed the institutional landscape, creating new venues, located between academia and the world of think tanks, foundations, and policy institutes, for the study of Jewish politics.² The field's liminal position encourages research that speaks directly to pressing debates—but it also increases the risk that engagement will devolve into polemic.

If scholars have been debating the political implications of Jewish history since the turn of the 20th century, why is it only in the 1980s that the recovery of “the tradition” appears both possible and exigent? One could point to the ferment within Israeli politics in a period that witnessed the end of the Labor Party's electoral and cultural hegemony in 1977, the first Lebanon war in 1982, and the Oslo process in 1993. For many of the war's critics, the poverty of Israeli public discourse revealed the need for “a new political language” consonant with the realities of sovereign power (Biale 1986, p. 4; Chowers 2012). Moreover, in the early days of the Oslo process, it was not unreasonable to believe that developing such a language might enhance the prospects for pluralism and democracy in a Jewish state.

Alternatively, one could argue that a Jewish political tradition first became a desideratum with the emergence of a scholarly cohort, in the 1980s and 1990s, endowed with the skills requisite for its recovery. Combining a yeshiva background with academic training in philosophy and political theory, this (overwhelmingly male) cohort was uniquely poised to translate rabbinic discourse for a political theory audience. Less remarked but no less significant is the fact that the field's founders are all native English speakers whose cultural and scholarly formation lies at the intersection of Israel and North America. English, rather than Hebrew, is the language in which the tradition has been revived.³ Indeed, the investment in the existence of a tradition reflects the disciplinary norms of Anglo-American political theory as much as it reflects a stereotypical Jewish obsession with the transmission of texts and practices from one generation to the next. Although diasporic networks and solidarities provide the field's condition of possibility, leading scholars have not devoted sufficient energy to envisioning a truly diasporic research program, one that moves beyond Israeli political controversies to imagine modes of political membership appropriate to a still-dispersed people. This omission is one symptom of the field's fraught relationship to the tradition's diasporic origins.

¹In this context, “Hebrew” refers to biblical texts, which predate rabbinic Judaism, and their subsequent appropriations by Jews and non-Jews alike. “Jewish” traditions are those of rabbinic Judaism. The earliest rabbinic texts were compiled between 300 and 500 C.E., but the term “rabbinic” is also used to describe medieval and modern texts based on authoritative traditions of legal reasoning.

²Each of the projects that I discuss in the next section received significant institutional support from, and remains closely identified with, an Israeli research institute. Daniel Elazar founded the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs; Yoram Hazony founded the Shalem Center, which, in 2013, became Shalem College, Israel's first liberal arts college; and Michael Walzer edited *The Jewish Political Tradition* with colleagues from the Shalom Hartman Institute.

³It is instructive to compare *The Jewish Political Tradition* with *Maft'e'akh: Lexical Review of Political Thought*, an online journal founded by Adi Ophir in 2010 and published in English, Hebrew, and Arabic. Ophir contends that a new political lexicon is required to make sense of current political conditions—especially, but not exclusively, in Israel/Palestine. Yet few of the concepts in Ophir's lexicon (e.g., “life,” “photography,” “refugees”) derive from Jewish sources.

CONTEMPORARY TURNS TO TRADITION

The Impossibility of a Jewish Political Tradition

One of the earliest published references to a Jewish political tradition appears in the Hebrew edition⁴ of Gershon Weiler's *Jewish Theocracy* (1976), an erudite polemic against the institutional imbrication of religion and politics in the State of Israel. In the book's introduction, Weiler gestures toward something called a Jewish political tradition only to deny its very existence:

The central thesis of this book is that the Jewish religion and the existence of this state [Israel] are antithetical to each other by their very essence. It follows that it is impossible for a state, which is Jewish in its essence, to exist at all. Zionism was and remains a national movement and, in the context of Jewish tradition, it is a movement of rebellion and revolution. No compromise is possible between this movement and religious tradition. Therefore, no sense can be given to demands for a state according to the Torah or to the counsel of those who lobby for shaping the laws of the state on the basis of the so-called political tradition of Judaism. For no such tradition exists, and all who think—following Dubnow and others—that the institution of the Resh Galuta or the Council of the Four Lands are political orders have not even reached the threshold of minimal understanding in the matter of the essence of a sovereign state (Weiler 1976, p. 9).⁵

According to Weiler, a Jewish political tradition is a contradiction in terms because rabbinic Judaism constitutes an accommodation to the absence of sovereignty—which, Weiler insists, is tantamount to the absence of politics. For Weiler, the controversy surrounding the existence of a Jewish political tradition is in no way antiquarian. Rather, the integrity of Israeli sovereignty is at stake. Like theocrats bent on clerical rule, proponents of the tradition would model the state on diasporic practices, which impulse betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of what, according to Weiler, is required to maintain a sovereign state. Writing at a moment when the field of Jewish political thought remained inchoate, Weiler provides a succinct illustration of the ideological climate in which these projects germinated. For Weiler, the scholarly controversy surrounding the existence of a Jewish political tradition is, at base, a political debate about the interpretation of Zionism (revolutionary or traditional?) and Israel's Jewish character (or lack thereof).

Moreover, Weiler's diagnosis of the tradition's ideological valence is linked to his account of its historical and scholarly provenance. To posit the existence of a tradition, scholars must classify the communal institutions of diasporic Jews as bona fide political orders. With the attribution of this position to Simon Dubnow (1860–1941), a journalist and historian of Eastern European Jewry, Weiler locates proponents of a Jewish political tradition in a diasporic lineage. Dubnow is best known as the theoretician of Autonomism, a variety of diaspora nationalism. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, diaspora nationalists demanded collective rights and cultural autonomy in Eastern Europe, challenging the Zionist insistence on Palestine as the location for Jewish national projects (Dubnow 1970; Rabinovitch 2012, 2014). When Weiler identifies Dubnow as the progenitor of the Jewish political tradition, he puts the issue of sovereignty—specifically, whether it is a precondition for political agency—at the crux of his argument with Dubnow's putative descendants.

⁴English edition: Weiler G. 1988. *Jewish Theocracy*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

⁵The Resh Galuta, or Exilarch, was the leader of the Jewish community in Babylon after 597 B.C.E. The Council of the Four Lands was the umbrella legislative body for Jewish communities in Poland from 1580 to 1764.

Although Weiler zeroes in on the political controversies motivating the tradition's recovery, he is less prescient regarding the implications of these projects for the integrity of sovereignty. Weiler is correct to note the Dubnovian resonance of the field's fundamental premise—namely, the continuity of Jewish political agency throughout history. Yet Weiler's fears about the erosion of state sovereignty prove unfounded. The leading proponents of a Jewish political tradition are reluctant diasporists, disinclined to challenge the conceptual and political priority of the sovereign state. Having taken great care to identify political dynamics of nonsovereign polities, the field's founders are nevertheless unwilling to engage with radical challenges from within the tradition to regnant definitions of politics and modes of political thinking.

The Covenantal Tradition

In 1980, Daniel Elazar (1934–1999) conjured the field into existence with a call to recover the Jewish political tradition, “so that it may fill a vital and needed role in contemporary Jewish life—both in Israel and in the Diaspora” (Elazar 1980, p. 250). Elazar's claim for the existence of a tradition rests on empirical observation of “striking similarities in the structure of Jewish institutions in Israel and the diaspora, past and present” (Elazar & Cohen 1985, p. 1). Jewish political behavior constitutes a tradition, Elazar contends, because it exhibits repeated “patterns,” patterns that reflect deeply embedded—indeed, seemingly indelible—cultural norms (Elazar & Cohen 1985, p. 1). In all times and places, Elazar and Cohen argue, Jews have governed their communities in accordance with covenantal principles “whose origins are to be found in the Bible” (Elazar 1997, p. 9). The primacy of covenant means that the Jewish political tradition prescribes certain kinds of relationships but affords flexibility in the design of regimes. Thus, the ideal Jewish polity distributes authority between three “crowns”—the crown of Torah, the crown of *keburnah* (priesthood), and the crown of *malikut* (kingship)—but the identity of the crown holders and the balance of power between them differs in every epoch (Cohen 1990). The primary task for scholars in the field that Elazar calls Jewish political studies is to establish that apparently dissimilar regimes—such as the Hasmonean dynasty (c. 140 B.C.E.) and the American Jewish Congress—represent adaptations of the same organizational model. Having reconstructed the history of the Jewish polity from Abraham to the establishment of the State of Israel, Elazar and Cohen conclude that the Jewish political tradition is theocratic, republican, federal, and egalitarian.

Judged by elementary standards of historical research, the claim for “the continuity of Jewish governmental forms and expressions over long periods and across cultural watersheds” (Elazar & Cohen 1985, p. 19) proves untenable. Yet the project's scholarly limitations only increase its diagnostic value for those seeking to understand the field's genesis. Elazar's determination to find a covenant in every epoch of Jewish history reflects an adamant refusal to credit the revolutionary pretensions of modern Jewish movements (e.g., secularism and political Zionism). “At the moment of the renewal of full Jewish political life” (p. 2), with the “reestablishment of a Jewish state” (p. 1), it becomes imperative to demonstrate not only that Jews have always been political but that they have always been political in roughly the same way (Elazar & Cohen 1985). By establishing transhistorical continuity, Elazar hopes to vindicate Zionism's authenticity, refuting claims that Zionism is a wholly secular movement, a standard 19th-century nationalism. For the state to count as Jewish, Elazar assumes, it must extend patterns that date to the Bible—and, implicitly, it must have messianic, religious significance. Yet the state's “reestablishment” is nevertheless a privileged historical moment, for Jews can finally fulfill the injunction “to build the ‘kingdom of heaven’—the good commonwealth—on earth” (Elazar 1997, p. xx).

In short, there are limits to how far Elazar is willing to push his leveling tendencies. The project's greatest scholarly liability—the leveling of distinctions between ancient and modern,

sovereign states and local communities—is also the source of its radical political potential, for it decenters the paradigm of state sovereignty. Elazar (1997, p. xxiv) notes that the tradition “has no idea of the state as a reified entity,” and he criticizes the socialist, state-centered policies of Israel’s founding generations as inauthentic concessions to European models (Elazar & Cohen 1985, p. 20). In keeping with this critique, but from a staunchly Zionist position, Elazar advocates a federal solution, combining elements of self-rule and shared rule, to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. On Elazar’s (1991, p. 10) diagnosis, “the Middle East is suffering from a devastating problem of overemphasis on political sovereignty,” a problem that could be solved by a return to the tradition’s federal principles. Although Elazar is eager to entertain critiques, from within the tradition, of the centralized state, he resists a parallel critique of Zionism. If the tradition does not prescribe a set regime, and diasporic institutions instantiate the same covenantal model as the State of Israel, why does the latter have a claim to priority as “the center of the world for Jews” (Elazar & Cohen 1985, p. 259)? Elazar’s privileging of Israel reflects his (biblically inspired) conviction that the Land of Israel is “the only place where complete Jewish individual and collective self-fulfillment is possible” (Elazar & Cohen 1985, p. 6). But Elazar’s uncritical relationship to Zionism also reflects limitations of his covenantal model. Focusing on communal organization, which ostensibly conforms to a fixed pattern, Elazar diverts scholarly attention away from ideology—that is, from areas of intense and unrelenting disagreement. Elazar appears to believe that he can harness Dubnovian insights for Zionist projects while insulating Zionism from diasporist critique.

The Hebraic Tradition

The Jewish contribution to the development of Western democracy is a leitmotif running through Elazar’s work. Thus, early volumes of Elazar’s journal, *Jewish Political Studies Review*, include theme issues on the place of Jewish thought within the Western canon, such as “Thomas Hobbes Confronts the Bible” (1992), “Spinoza and the Bible” (1995), and “John Locke and the Bible” (1997). In the early 2000s, Yoram Hazony and his colleagues at the Shalem Center took up this expressly comparative project and made it the basis for another tradition-building initiative. Their excavation of a Hebraic tradition—analogous to the Greek and Roman traditions—is designed to secure recognition of the Jews’ contribution to Western modernity. This tradition is “Hebraic,” rather than “Jewish,” because it includes non-Jewish appropriations of biblical texts. Thus defined, the Hebraic tradition is in tension with the political campaign for which Hazony recruits it—a campaign to cement Israel’s identity as a Jewish state.⁶

One of the most striking aspects of Jewish political thought’s disciplinary trajectory has been its complete absence from the field of comparative political theory, which emerged in the late 1990s. The highest-profile project within Jewish political thought, *The Jewish Political Tradition* (2000, 2003), is contemporaneous with the comparative political theory subfield, and its lead editor, Michael Walzer, is one of the most renowned political theorists of his generation. Yet there is literally no mention of Walzer’s work, or of Jewish political thought more generally, in programmatic statements for the field’s scope and direction (Godrej 2009, March 2009, von Vacano 2015). In von Vacano’s enumeration, Islamic, Indian, Chinese, African, Latin American, and Eastern European thought fall under the rubric of comparative political theory, but Jewish political thought does not. One could justify this omission with the observation that research in Jewish political thought seldom indulges in cross-cultural comparison. It is written by and for

⁶Here, the relevant distinction is between a Jewish state—whose symbols, public culture, and legislation are designed to advance Jewish interests—and a state of its citizens, which is only “Jewish” by demographic accident.

Jews, and it remains ensconced within Jewish intellectual and political horizons. Yet, presumably, the omission also reflects a judgment, on the part of comparative political thought's impresarios, regarding Judaism's geographical and/or ideological location—namely, within the West, whose hegemony they contest. Too often, “comparative” research in Jewish political thought seems designed to confirm this hasty ideological judgment. Borrowing tropes from postcolonial theory, some Jewish studies scholars have celebrated diaspora “as an alternative to the model of self-determination, which is, after all, in itself a Western, imperialist imposition on the rest of the world” (Boyarin & Boyarin 1993, p. 711). Yet scholars affiliated with the discipline of political theory have tended to insist, in ironic accord with left intellectuals whose cultural influence they lament, on Judaism's Western orientation. In both cases, the comparative turn in the study of Jewish political thought advances apologetic aims—Jews either founded the West, or they resist Western imperialism—while failing to capture the vexed position that Jews and Judaism have historically occupied within Western traditions (see Nirenberg 2013).

In the work that Shalem has sponsored, the investment in the existence of a tradition reflects the admissions criteria of the Western political theory canon. The point of departure for *Hebraic Political Studies*, Shalem Press' short-lived (2005–2009) peer-reviewed journal, is a conundrum about the discipline of political theory. Given that canonical figures from the early modern period routinely cited Hebrew texts, why have historians of political thought ignored the Hebrews while lavishing attention on the Greeks? The project's sponsors blame this oversight on the distortions of Enlightenment secularism (Schochet & Eyffinger 2005, p. 34; Berman 2008, p. 167; Hazony 2012, pp. 6, 15–20). By designating the tradition as Hebraic, Hazony and his colleagues acknowledge that Hebrew texts entered the Western canon through non-Jewish appropriation. A “Hebraic” tradition promises to be more inclusive than a “Jewish” tradition, but, for that reason, it is plagued by definitional conundrums. Are Hobbes' (1985 [1651]) allusions to the Book of Job in *Leviathan* evidence of a uniquely Hebrew (let alone Jewish) contribution? Or is Hobbes' Job more accurately classed as an English, Old Testament, Christian text? The journal's brief print run reflects the haziness of the Hebraic taxonomy—and, perhaps, the limited traction it provided to Hazony's expressly Jewish projects.

Compared to Elazar and Walzer, Hazony and his colleagues are singularly focused on the Hebrew Bible, whose political wisdom they tout (Hazony 1995, 2012; Wildavsky 2005; Trigano 2010). The Hebrew Bible proves critical for establishing the Jews' stature within the West, both because it was cited by non-Jews and because it antedates Greek political theory. When we read the Bible as a text of political theory, Berman (2008) contends, we realize that Jews were the first to articulate some of our most cherished ideals, such as equality. Indeed, Deuteronomy's egalitarian vision anticipates American democracy: “In a sense, this program is suggestive of the program that would appear only with the American founding fathers. Deuteronomy is a document in which heredity and class play little role in government—a document that has no word for class, caste, noble, or landed gentry” (Berman 2008, p. 80). In his resolute confrontation with the Bible's political deficits, Walzer provides a salutary rejoinder to apologetic efforts, such as Berman's (2008, pp. 80, 108), to align the Bible's political agenda with those of Montesquieu, the Federalists, and Francis Fukuyama. Yet Walzer's (2012a) dismayed conclusion that the Hebrew Bible is overwhelmingly “antipolitical” reflects a parallel approach to classifying Jewish texts. Just as Berman stakes his claim for the Hebrew Bible on its anticipation of modern liberalism, so Walzer takes the absence of an autonomous political realm, akin to those of ancient Greece, as evidence of its antipolitical tendencies. In neither case is there a sufficient effort to articulate biblical conceptions of politics in biblical terms.

Granted, gesturing toward received conceptions of the political may be necessary to make Jewish texts intelligible. Yet the quest for intelligibility does not entail wholesale deference to

established (i.e., Greek) norms. In theory, reading the Bible as a political text could challenge dominant assumptions about the methods appropriate to the study of politics. Hazony (2012, p. 31) affords glimmers of such a challenge when he elaborates “a new interpretive framework for reading the Hebrew Scriptures as works of reason” (as opposed to revelation). By Hazony’s admission, the Bible “looks much more like literature, or law, than philosophy” (p. 32). Thus, scholars who would excavate the Bible’s political teachings must tailor their interpretive methods to the text’s rhetorical strategies. Yet, even though Hazony sets out to redeem revelation from Strauss’ aspersions, he ultimately reinforces the view, inherited from Strauss, that political texts must be philosophical to merit consideration. Hazony rests his case for the Bible’s standing as “one of the masterpieces in the history of political philosophy” on the demonstration that its doctrines are in fact philosophical—identical in kind to those advanced by Plato or Hobbes (p. 141). Once we employ Hazony’s framework, “the attempt to gain insight into the will of the God of Israel ceases. . . to be an attempt to gain insight into what will be good for the Jews alone, and becomes an investigation into the nature of the moral and political order in general—an investigation of the kind the Greeks gave the name of *philosophia*” (p. 59). The arguments that Hazony employs to rehabilitate the Bible risk disqualifying rabbinic political discourse, which is much harder to assimilate to philosophical paradigms.

In other words, it is not immediately obvious why recovery of a Hebraic political tradition is a project incumbent upon Jews. At first glance, the concerns animating *Hebraic Political Studies* appear distant from those addressed in Shalem’s general-interest journal, *Azure: Ideas for the Jewish Nation* (1996–2012), which sought “to contribute as much as possible to the flourishing of the Jewish people in general and the success of the Jewish state in particular” (Sagiv 2012). Indeed, the most influential study of political Hebraism, Eric Nelson’s *The Hebrew Republic* (2010), studiously avoids the political debates of actual Jews, past and present. Nelson’s story is a Protestant story, one that bears directly on the putative secularity of modern political theory—but not, it would seem, on Jewish politics and political thought.

Given the critical role that Hazony (2000, p. 80) assigns to “the power of ideas,” however, we should hesitate before concluding that his Hebraism is independent of his *kulturkampf*. In *The Jewish State*, a fierce polemic whose historical narrative has been widely discredited (Arkush 2001, Myers 2001, Novak 2001), Hazony warns that Israel’s most venerated intellectuals are waging a subversive campaign to undermine the legitimacy of a Jewish state—which campaign has largely succeeded, given the anemic response of the state’s partisans. To Hazony’s (2000, p. 151) chagrin, proponents of a Jewish state have forgotten that “the state is, as Herzl had always claimed, an idea. And as an idea, it is built up in the minds of men through the fashioning of ‘imponderables’ and memories, symbols and dreams.” Yet how does the recovery of a Hebraic political tradition advance the campaign to preserve Israel’s identity as a Jewish state? After all, to defend the Bible’s philosophical dignity, Hazony insists on the abstract, general dimensions of a text that appears particularistic. In the campaign to defend Israel’s Jewish character, however, Hazony (2000, p. 28) charges Jewish universalists with “self-hatred.”

This tension between Hebraism and Judaism is symptomatic of political Zionism’s historically conflicted relationship to liberalism. Shalem’s Hebraist projects seek to document “the Jewish roots of Western freedom” (Oz-Salzberger 2002). As a Herzlian Zionist, however, Hazony acknowledges that Western freedom proved illusory for European Jews. Emancipation, or the admission of Jewish individuals to equal political rights (starting in France in 1791), forced Jews to abandon communal autonomy but failed to deliver substantive equality in return. One might expect Jews who accept Herzl’s critique of “the social-contract state as a fundamentally erroneous theory, which, in addition, doomed the Jews to perpetual helplessness and ruin” (Hazony 2000, p. 106) to hesitate before claiming ownership of Western liberalism. Yet Hazony is determined

to identify Jews with the West, and vice versa, even at the risk of cognitive dissonance. Here, he follows Herzl, who promised that the establishment of a Jewish state would enable Jews to enjoy the liberal culture from which they had been forcibly excluded (Schorske 1981). By contrast, calls for Jews to “somehow fuse with the Orient” are the purview of those (e.g., Buber) whom Hazony identifies as Zionism’s ideological enemies (Hazony 2000, p. 197).

For our purposes, the task that Hazony assigns to the Hebraic tradition is as significant as its geographical-ideological orientation. As Hazony concedes, Herzl did not derive his alternative to “the social-contract state” from Jewish or Hebrew traditions. Rather, Herzl invokes the Roman concept of *negotiorum gestio* to support his contention that the state’s foundation is justified by necessity rather than by popular consent (Herzl 1988, pp. 136–39). Although Herzl does not derive the state’s legal basis and institutional framework from Jewish or Hebrew traditions, he does, on occasion, exploit the resonance of Jewish “memories, symbols, and dreams”—e.g., “the Maccabeans will rise again” (Herzl 1988, p. 157). Following Herzl, Hazony invokes Hebraic traditions to revivify political attachments (to the West, to sovereignty, to the state’s Jewish character). The problem that exercises Hazony, and for which he recruits the tradition, is the failure to transmit Zionist ideals—not the justification of sovereignty or the genealogy of the nation-state. At the end of the day, Hazony assigns Hebrew and Jewish traditions a rather modest role—that of rhetorical suasion—in arbitrating the political controversies in which he is passionately engaged.

The Jewish Tradition

As we have seen, in scholarship on Jewish political thought, the notion of tradition serves legitimating functions both internal (defending Zionism’s authenticity) and external (securing scholarly respectability). The *Jewish Political Tradition* anthologies, edited by Lorberbaum, Walzer, and Zohar, are distinguished not only by scholarly ambition and rigor but also by greater sophistication regarding the intellectual and political work that tradition can perform. A projected four-volume anthology (two volumes have been published thus far), *The Jewish Political Tradition* pairs canonical Jewish texts on political themes with contemporary commentary. The texts excerpted span the Hebrew Bible, the rabbinic corpus, medieval Jewish philosophy, and modern political tracts. Whereas Elazar’s insistence on transhistorical patterns strains credulity, and Hazony deprives nonphilosophical texts of dignity, Walzer and his colleagues manage to expand received notions of what counts as political knowledge. Walzer avoids the pitfalls of apologetics and tendentiousness—yet he does not altogether escape the field’s characteristic tensions. In his single-authored works, Walzer retreats from the ambitious vision of *The Jewish Political Tradition* to a conception of tradition as a vehicle for cultural reproduction, a conception that risks muting the critical force and theoretical interest of traditional Jewish texts.

In *The Jewish Political Tradition*, Walzer defines the tradition as an ongoing debate whose bounds are set by the criterion of intertextuality (Walzer et al. 2000). Given the Jews’ history of statelessness, Walzer promises, retrieving these debates will challenge a foundational assumption of Western politics, namely, the “association of politics with the state” (p. xxi). One can only posit the existence of a Jewish political tradition if one allows that “politics is pervasive, with or without state sovereignty” (p. xxi). Once one affirms the pervasiveness of politics, institutions like the medieval *kabal*—“the polis of exilic Jewry”—emerge as unique “achievements” commanding theorists’ attention (p. xxx). Here, the relevant achievement is not only the maintenance of communal institutions but the distinctive literature that they generated. *Pace* Hazony, the point is not that, once deciphered, biblical and rabbinic texts turn out to be “philosophical.” Rather, the editors demonstrate that, just as the state does not exhaust the polity, so philosophy does not exhaust the terrain of political reflection. In addition to the Bible, one finds political thought in the full

range of rabbinic literature—"in the Talmud, in midrashic collections of legends and parables, retellings and expansions of the biblical narrative, in commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, in legal responsa" (Walzer et al. 2000, p. xxii).

Walzer and his colleagues' great contribution, in *The Jewish Political Tradition*, involves making rabbinic discourse accessible to the uninitiated. A set of political commitments—to pluralism, deliberation, and this-worldliness—motivates this attempt to translate, both literally and figuratively, rabbinic political discourse. Running throughout Walzer's work is an argument, sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit, that rabbinic texts are more politically fruitful than biblical texts. In this view, the political promise of rabbinic texts is inextricably linked to the interpretive difficulties they pose. As Fishbane (2000, p. lv) explains in one of the volume's introductory essays, rabbinic culture is "a culture of exegetical intensity and debate, of conflicts and contradictions"—the Talmud famously leaves disputations open-ended. In Walzer's view, the Jewish political tradition does not only comprise the range of positions that Jews have taken on, say, the legitimacy of the gentile state—it also includes the political culture that these deliberations model. Walzer prefers the rabbis' deliberative culture—focused on negotiating the practical dilemmas of everyday life—to the Bible's theocratic outlook, which, he warns, fosters messianism and quietism. "As against the prophets, who waited for the day of the Lord," the rabbis "affirmed the principle on which politics necessarily rests: 'it is not in heaven'" (Walzer 2012a, p. 212). With this celebration of the rabbinic sensibility, Walzer distances himself from classical Zionists, such as David Ben-Gurion, whose fascination with biblical narratives of Hebrew independence was the flip side of their disdain for diasporic Judaism. Walzer's provocative contention is that diasporic traditions are more amenable to contemporary revitalization, even or especially within the context of a sovereign Jewish state.

The editors' investment in rabbinic texts—which make significant demands on readers—is one index of their ambition as tradition builders. By reconstructing debates that have unfolded over generations, in multiple literary genres, the editors introduce a discursive tradition with its own characteristic preoccupations, modes of argument, and epistemological assumptions. "To join the arguments that have characterized the tradition and to carry them forward," as per the editors' invitation (Walzer et al. 2000, p. xxiv), readers must be willing to engage traditional texts on something approximating their own terms. In other words, readers must suspend received assumptions about the abstraction, generality, and systematicity of political thought—and they must abandon familiar rubrics (e.g., rights) for dividing up the political world. According to this ambitious notion, the Jewish political tradition is characterized by a distinctive set of discursive practices, a singular way of negotiating matters of common concern—and these practices have independent scholarly value, beyond the fact that they are "Jewish" and therefore belong to "us." At first glance, a field dedicated to this conception of the tradition could seem forbiddingly hermetic. Precisely because it forces us to experiment with alternative ways of knowing, however, such a tradition promises to reorient the study of politics.

Yet, in recent work, Walzer appears less interested in experimenting with rabbinic modes of political inquiry than in enlisting Jewish traditions to bolster certain strands of left Zionism. Speaking in his own voice,⁷ Walzer describes *The Jewish Political Tradition* as part of an attempt to grapple with what he calls "the paradox of liberation" (Walzer 2007, 2013, 2015). The failure of revolutionary leaders in India, Algeria, and Israel to anticipate and combat religious fundamentalism leads him to worry about "the cultural reproduction of the secular democratic left" (Walzer 2015, p. 124). The project of national liberation is fraught, on Walzer's diagnosis, because liberationists

⁷Walzer's coeditors, Menachem Lorberbaum and Noam Zohar, have not published first-person accounts detailing their motivations for creating *The Jewish Political Tradition*.

must critique traditions that impede popular mobilization, but if their critique is too sweeping, they risk alienating the people. “The old ways must be repudiated and overcome—totally. But the old ways are cherished by many of the men and women whose ways they are. That is the paradox of liberation” (Walzer 2015, p. 19). In the Israeli case, secular Zionists’ wholesale negation of Judaism produced a culture too “thin” to sustain popular allegiance, and too weak to rebut traditionalist claims of authenticity. By his own account, Walzer returns to the Jewish political tradition in hopes of producing “a stronger, thicker, and more appealing version of liberationist culture” (Walzer 2013, p. 8). In these programmatic statements, Walzer casts *The Jewish Political Tradition* as a contribution to what he calls “connected criticism”—criticism that derives moral resonance and political efficacy from the critic’s allegiance to the culture she criticizes (Walzer 2002).

For our purposes, the accuracy of Walzer’s rendition of Israeli political history is less significant than the notion of tradition that he invokes when lamenting the self-defeating excesses of Zionist negation. When summarizing the paradox of liberation, Walzer equates tradition with the “old ways.” Here, the tradition is not a critical practice, sustained by a scholarly elite exhibiting jurisprudential sophistication (the rabbis), but a set of cherished folkways. To perpetuate the liberationist project, Walzer contends, secular Zionists must repent of their modernist hauteur. They must learn to appreciate the tradition’s “value for the Jewish people” and find ways to incorporate the old “into the culture of the new” (Walzer 2015, p. 126). Yet to assert the tradition’s value for the Jewish people is not necessarily to affirm the value of its political insights, conceptual categories, exegetical practices, or historical testimony. As it happens, Walzer (2015, p. 126) finds much political wisdom in the tradition, as well as much that “needed to be, and still needs to be, negated.” Yet his stance toward the tradition is more instrumental than receptive. By his admission, Walzer invokes the tradition to enhance the emotional resonance of political ideals—those of “the secular democratic left”—adopted prior to his encounter with rabbinic sources. When Walzer depicts the tradition as a shared vernacular, he offers a relatively narrow vision of critical engagement. Understood as a collection of “old ways,” the tradition can threaten secularists’ political hegemony, but it does not appear to pose a credible theoretical challenge to the liberationist project itself, which, on Walzer’s view, “is worth completing” (Walzer 2015, p. 90).

My point is not to deny the moral virtues or political effectiveness of “a critical engagement with the old culture” (Walzer 2015, p. 32). As the most casual observer of Israel’s 2015 elections can attest, the center-left’s electoral weakness derives, in part, from lingering perceptions of elitism and disconnection. At a moment when Israeli politics are consumed by culture wars, it is scarcely surprising that Walzer and Hazony recruit the tradition for projects of cultural reproduction (from opposite sides of the ideological spectrum). My worry, rather, is that Walzer weakens *The Jewish Political Tradition*’s critical force by relegating traditional Jewish texts to what is essentially an auxiliary role. Providing Jewish readers with Jewish reasons may replenish the ranks of the Zionist left, but it is unlikely to reorient our political ontology, as Walzer’s case attests.

Engagement with the Jewish political tradition does not appear to have transformed Walzer’s fundamental convictions about politics. In *Spheres of Justice*, written prior to his collaboration with the Hartman Institute, Walzer (1983, p. 317) states, “Sovereignty is a permanent feature of political life.” In the Introduction to *The Jewish Political Tradition*, however, Walzer (2000) promises that the encounter with Jewish texts will yield a more expansive definition of politics, one that challenges sovereignty’s historical and conceptual priority. Here, the tradition’s interest derives less from its efficacy as a cultural connector than from its potential to inspire a radical rethinking, by Jews and non-Jews alike, of reigning political assumptions. Yet, having studied rabbinic texts and marveled at diasporic political institutions, Walzer appears reluctant to pursue such a rethinking. His recent work on the Hebrew Bible (Walzer 2012a) takes sovereignty as a political standard, with the result that politics no longer pervades Jewish history. The Bible’s theocratic doctrines are “antipolitical,”

in Walzer's judgment, because they are corrosive of (human) sovereignty (pp. xii–xiii). “There can’t be fully sovereign states, or a worked-out theory of popular (or any other) sovereignty, so long as God is an active sovereign” (p. 202). Unlike the biblical authors, the rabbis exhibit the makings of a political sensibility, but dispersion prevented them from practicing politics itself. The rabbis “avoided politics (or, we might say, politics avoided them: they were denied the opportunities of sovereignty)” (p. 212). Although Walzer attenuates the link between national independence and political agency—the rabbis display greater political acumen than the biblical authors—he does not relinquish sovereignty as a political paradigm.

Walzer's vacillation regarding sovereignty's permanence is yet another example of the reluctance, on the part of the field's founders, to pursue what I have called Dubnovian impulses. Although the field's architects take the pervasiveness of politics, “with or without state sovereignty,” as a point of departure, they scarcely relax sovereignty's grip as a framework for political thinking. One might object that reluctance is to be expected, given that Elazar, Hazony, and Walzer affirm variants of state-centered Zionism. [For example, Walzer (2012b) describes his Zionism as “a universal statism,” committed to granting all oppressed peoples the physical and economic security that, in his view, only a state can provide.] But this objection is misplaced. Much of the field's intellectual excitement derives from the fact that, when confronting the contingencies of Jewish history, partisans of the state are willing to reevaluate the relationship of politics to sovereignty. To understand why Walzer's willingness proves limited, we need to focus on his conception of tradition, as much as his statist brand of Zionism. When Walzer envisions a more ambitious role for Jewish political traditions, he treats state sovereignty as a regime that requires historical and political justification, rather than as a foregone conclusion. In other words, the encounter with political traditions developed under conditions of statelessness prompts the beginnings of an inquiry into sovereignty's political importance. When Walzer demotes the tradition to a vehicle for cultural reproduction, however, he forecloses a conversation about whether state sovereignty is the optimal vehicle for Jewish liberation. My claim is not that scholars must reject sovereignty as non-Jewish, an inauthentic Western imposition. Rather, it is that scholars who affirm sovereignty's conceptual and political priority must defend this stance, rather than treating it as a default. Absent a richer notion of tradition, a field that documents the variety and vitality of Jewish political history is liable to exacerbate the constriction of Jewish political discourse to state-centered ideologies.

THE TURN TO DIASPORIC IDENTITY

While proponents of the tradition were wrestling with its diasporic roots, a neo-diasporist revival of sorts was taking place in other corners of Jewish scholarship. With the disintegration of the Oslo process and the dwindling prospects for a negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, scholars in law, philosophy, comparative literature, and Jewish studies reopened theoretical debates about the justice of Zionism. Although this literature draws on political theory, and addresses dilemmas surrounding Israel's Jewish character, it is notably isolated from the field established by Elazar, Hazony, Walzer, and their colleagues. Indeed, these scholars seem unaware of or indifferent to projects to recover “the tradition.” Yet some of them—namely, those who disavow Zionism—are determined to claim a traditional, diasporic lineage. This enthusiasm for diaspora does not, however, bespeak greater political sophistication or a more searching examination of the institutional conditions for Jewish political agency. Indeed, a survey of this work underscores the need to develop the conception of tradition that animates *The Jewish Political Tradition*—a conception in which we return to the sources to unsettle, rather than confirm, existing political and theoretical frameworks. Taking the tradition seriously as a site of political reflection is a

prerequisite for a nuanced evaluation of the concepts and institutions that support Jewish political empowerment.

The parties to this debate have mobilized a variety of theoretical resources in their efforts to rehabilitate, reform, or disavow Zionism. Ironically, cultural nationalists have tended to rely on the idioms of Anglo-American philosophy when defending the possibility of a “liberal” or “just” Zionism (which the current State of Israel fails to embody) (Tamir 1993; Gans 2008, 2013). By contrast, many, but not all (see Azoulay & Ophir 2013), who reject national conceptions of political membership have sought a Jewish lineage for the critique of Zionism. With the exception of Raz-Krakotzkin (2007), the thinkers who celebrate diaspora as an alternative to national sovereignty reside in the diaspora—specifically, France, Britain, and North America (Boyarin & Boyarin 1993, Steiner 1996, Brenner 2003, Magid 2006, Butler 2012, Boyarin 2015). Wolfe’s recent work (2014) illustrates the popular appeal of diasporic identity among American Jews at a moment of increasing disaffection with the direction of Israeli politics.

Given that Zionism’s Jewish critics have been subject to accusations of disloyalty and self-hatred, it is not altogether surprising that they would seek a Jewish warrant. Yet invocations of diaspora are not merely defensive or polemical maneuvers. The most prominent exponents of this approach, Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin and Judith Butler, take the critique of Israel’s current regime as an occasion for theorizing the ethics of particular identity (Cooper 2015). For these theorists, Israeli ethnocracy illustrates the ethical and political liabilities of integral identities. In diasporic traditions, by contrast, Butler and the Boyarins find ethically redeeming models of what it is “to ‘be’ a Jew” (Butler 2012, p. 15). According to the Boyarins, diasporic identity escapes the violence to which territorially based identities are prone because, in its denial of “a natural association between this people and a particular land,” it reveals “the impossibility of seeing Jewish culture as a self-enclosed, bounded phenomenon” (Boyarin & Boyarin 1993, p. 721). From diasporic traditions both Jewish and Palestinian (Arendt, Levinas, Benjamin, Said), Butler derives an ethics that “contests sovereign notions of the subject and ontological claims of self-identity” (Butler 2012, p. 9). Sovereign notions of the subject confine Jews within a hermetic circuit of self-concern, Butler argues. By contrast, an ethic of dispossession, in which we are obliged to depart from ourselves and cede ground to the other, “takes us beyond nationalism” (p. 9).

Like Walzer, theorists of diasporic identity enlist Jewish traditions to do the work of connection—in this case, nurturing ethical bonds between Jews and non-Jews. And, as in Walzer’s case, the focus on connection inhibits sufficiently robust debate about the political importance, or lack thereof, of the sovereign state. For someone convinced that sovereignty is inimical to human plurality, Butler exhibits scant interest in diasporic Jewish traditions as a site of reflection about institutions, other than the nation-state, capable of fostering Jewish political agency. In the neo-diasporic literature, an investigation into the ethics of particular identity—what does “Jewish” mean?—has replaced a more traditional diasporic debate about the metaphysical, geographical, and political conditions for self-rule. Proponents of diasporic identity devote their energies to theorizing the Jewish self or collective, rather than the Jewish polity, because they trust that the critical construction of identity will yield a determinate political stance. On this view, cultivation of a hybrid identity should inspire repudiation of political Zionism. In the annals of Zionism, however, there is little connection between what Butler (2012, p. 127) calls “an enclosed and self-referential notion of belonging” and the demand for Jewish sovereignty. Moreover, were Jews to adopt hybrid identities or noncommunitarian modes of belonging, they would still need to envision suitable political arrangements. Understood as a resource for ethical cultivation, the tradition provides little guidance here, precisely because adoption of a diasporic identity does not yield a determinate stance on questions of regime (e.g., one-state, two-state, or federal solutions

to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict). Devoting their energies to the theorization of Jewish identity, diasporic thinkers have missed the opportunity to develop a political rejoinder to Zionist defenses of state sovereignty.

However, a more sustained engagement with traditional ways of conceptualizing the political could foster nuanced debate about the possibility and advisability of loosening Jewish attachments to state sovereignty. Through the work of organizing and translating rabbinic texts, the editors of *The Jewish Political Tradition* have enriched our understanding of Jewish political vocabularies and their historical development. This work is comparative, in the sense that one needs to situate Abravanel (1437–1508) within traditions of Italian republicanism in order to understand his critique of monarchy. Given the apologetic temptations to which expressly comparative projects often succumb, however, a dedicated focus on Jewish thought and history may be more conducive to the realization of the field’s ambitions (both internal and external). Normative argument about contemporary Jewish politics must be historically informed—and the relevant history extends beyond rote invocations of the Holocaust. We are in a better position to understand the historically contingent reasons for Zionism’s ideological and practical success thanks to a wave of historical research on Zionism’s ideological competitors, such as Bundism and Autonomism (Myers 2011, Shanes 2012, Karlip 2013, Rabinovitch 2014). Yet, to fathom political Zionism’s ongoing appeal, we also need a history of the halachic, theological, and institutional resonance of terms like exile, diaspora, sovereignty, homeland, and self-determination. In other words, we need a genealogy of regnant interpretive frames, both Jewish and non-Jewish—frames that make liberalism and political Zionism seem like the default political options, given modern Jewish history. The tenacity of these frames is evidence not of ethical failure but of a poverty of imagination when it comes to envisioning political agency beyond the sovereign state. Approached as a historically situated mode of political reflection, rather than a generic resource for connection, the tradition can foster a more rigorous examination of the political forms that support self-determination.

Adopting a more ambitious conception of the tradition might also encourage creative thinking about the purview of diasporic political thinking. Butler has celebrated the multiplicity of American Jewish identifications, challenging the presumed “equivalence between Jews and Israel” (Butler 2004, p. 113). Yet, as one reads the work of contemporary diasporic theorists, it can often seem like the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is the only political question that engages diasporic Jews as Jews. Ironically, proponents of diasporic identity have devoted scant attention to the political predicaments of European and North American Jews (although see Boyarin 2002). Religious traditionalists, by contrast, have undertaken sustained efforts to construct a political theology responsive to the dilemmas of North American Jews. In this vein, Novak seeks to demonstrate that orthodox Jews can “be participants in a contractually based social order in good faith” (Novak 2005, p. 4; see also Novak 2000, pp. 29–30). In Novak’s view, orthodox Jews (and religious Christians) are exemplary democratic citizens, given their commitment to transcendent norms that precede the state and limit its authority (Novak 2005, pp. 9, 216; Mittleman 2000). Novak (2005, p. 236) operates with an emphatically theistic definition of the Jewish tradition, and some of the positions that he defends as authentic (e.g., opposition to same-sex marriage) run counter to mainstream Jewish opinion. Indeed, Novak’s framing of the religious citizen’s dilemma arguably owes more to the Christian critique of secularism than it does to halachic argumentation. Although Novak’s theocratic convictions risk alienating secular readers, his work nevertheless provides an important provocation regarding the modes of political thinking appropriate to a dispersed people. A diasporic ethos fixated on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict merely reproduces the state’s conceptual priority. To contest this priority, we need to move beyond the provision of Jewish warrants for preferred ideologies, to envision nonterritorial modes of political membership.

CONCLUSION

In the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Spinoza (1991 [1670]) famously elaborates the implications of Hobbesian models of sovereignty for modern Jewish politics. If there is no such thing as politics without sovereignty, then Jews dispersed throughout the world do not constitute a political collective, nor do individual diasporic communities count as polities. Writing at the dawn of the nation-state system, Spinoza can only conceive of two viable political options for Jews—individual citizenship in tolerant democratic republics or citizenship in a (hypothetical) restored Jewish state. When Spinoza transforms Judaism into a private cultural identity consonant with democratic citizenship (Smith 1997), he simultaneously releases Jewish individuals from rabbinic authority and narrows the possibilities for Jewish self-understanding. For Spinoza withdraws the myriad possibilities for Jewish politics on the local and transnational levels. Spinoza can make sense of Hebrew or Israeli (or liberal) politics, but he leaves no room for traditions that affirm a political conception of Jewish peoplehood while denying that a Jewish polity must take the form of a nation-state (Cooper 2014).

As a matter of fact, modern Jews have subscribed to a wide variety of political ideologies and movements. After the *kabala*'s demise, diaspora nationalists advocated subnational autonomy in Eastern Europe and North America; observant Jews maintained autonomous legal systems with jurisdiction over public and private disputes; and civil rights activists mobilized against racism and antisemitism. Although Jews continued to practice variations upon nonstatist Jewish politics, they were less likely to understand their political agency in these terms, and the scope for Jewish politics was consequently narrowed. Moreover, in the years following World War II, the vast majority of the world's Jews have lived in North America or the State of Israel, under regimes (liberalism and Zionism) that roughly correspond to Spinoza's two options. It can sometimes seem that Jewish political discourse has reverted to a Spinozist horizon, captivated by an interpretive frame that makes liberalism and political Zionism seem like the default political options, given modern Jewish history. Too often, scholarly debate about Jewish politics revolves around the two poles that Spinoza identified, bereft of theoretical resources for imagining things otherwise.

Yet the hegemony of Spinozist frames has begun to weaken, if ever so slightly, in response to factors including the collapse of the Oslo process, realignments in the Westphalian order, and, significantly, the establishment of the field of Jewish political thought. Research in Jewish political thought has made invaluable contributions to the enrichment of Jewish political discourse. Scholars who return to the tradition have advanced a powerful intramural critique of Zionism's "negation of the exile," and they have helped to render classical Zionist historiography obsolete. The major recovery projects have organized a body of literature that was at risk of languishing in the archives, making it available to political theorists for projects both historical and constructive. As a result, scholars have heightened appreciation for the richness and variety of Jewish political institutions and ideas. More important, the field's pioneers have exposed the historical and cultural contingency of our current political-theoretical constellation, in which sovereignty is the paradigm with which Jewish thinkers must wrestle.

Scholars in the field have shattered sovereignty's veneer of self-evidence, but they have yet to convene a sufficiently vibrant, contentious conversation about sovereignty's importance—a conversation the Jewish political tradition is uniquely positioned to host, given its diasporic lineage. This conversation has been hindered by the founders' ideological agendas, their excessive deference to Western canons of political theory, and their instrumental stance toward traditional Jewish texts. Scholars who would release Jewish political discourse from statist constraints can begin by cultivating a more receptive stance toward Jewish political traditions. In other words, scholars must rely on the tradition for more than a cherished, shared, and persuasive vernacular.

Ideally, engagement with Jewish texts can reorient our thinking about politics in more fundamental ways, and thereby illuminate modern Jewish predicaments. The relevant predicaments are as much theoretical as they are political, historical, and halachic—for they include the assumptions, both implicit and explicit, that shape our sense of political possibility.

Today, there is an ever more urgent need for the insights that this field is poised to offer. At the time of writing, the Israeli occupation has continued for 48 years. The nation-state form is starting to look less like the tradition's consummation than like an evanescent blip in Jewish political history. At a moment that calls for political imagination and judgment, nonstatist traditions of Jewish political thinking provide critical resources for debating the present and future contours of Jewish community. Embarking on the promised intramural debate about sovereignty's importance for Jewish political projects will also position scholars to engage wider currents in democratic theory. Confronted with developments such as the European debt crisis, unprecedented global migration, the rise of nonstate actors, transnational capital flows, and human rights regimes, democratic theorists increasingly call for sovereignty's reconfiguration or abandonment (Brown 2010, Benhabib 2011, Cocks 2014). Jewish political thought provides a fresh perspective on questions surrounding sovereignty's genealogy and future, for those who are willing to engage Jewish texts on their own historical, exegetical, and conceptual terms. Approached as a site for political reflection, rather than a cultural connector, the Jewish political tradition gains resonance for a wide audience, providing a historically informed account of the possibilities and perils of politics without sovereignty.

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