Reevaluating Spinoza's Legacy for Jewish Political Thought

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Jewish thinkers have long sought to dignify their projects by claiming Spinoza as a progenitor. In recent years, scholars have revived Spinoza's critique of theocracy as a counter to Judaism's supposed "antipolitical" tendencies. In this article, I contest lineages that trace admonitions against theocratic "antipolitics" back to Spinoza. When accounting for the resilience of the Hebrew theocracy, Spinoza accords political standing to communities organized on principles other than absolute sovereignty, and he evaluates them in political terms. With this interpretation, I challenge the political conclusions that scholars of Jewish thought have derived from Spinoza. Specifically, I demonstrate that the embrace of sovereignty as a precondition for agency is neither the only political conclusion that one can draw from the critique of theocracy, nor is it the most compelling conclusion for scholars of Jewish politics. I claim an alternative Spinozist legacy to reinvigorate debate about sovereignty's importance for Jewish political agency.

Modern Jewish thinkers have long sought to dignify their intellectual and political projects by claiming Spinoza as a progenitor. From the late eighteenth century onward, thinkers of diverse orientations have credited Spinoza with a series of firsts: the first modern Jew, the first secular Jew, the first liberal Jew, the first Zionist, the first modern democrat, and so on (Schwartz 2012). One noteworthy chapter in the history of Spinoza appropriations involves the recent revival, by scholars of Jewish political thought, of Spinoza's critique of theocracy. A defining controversy in scholarship on Jewish politics, from the 1980s onward, surrounds the existence of a "Jewish political tradition"—a dedicated tradition of reflection on matters of collective concern. Time and again, parties to this debate have felt the need to wrestle with Spinoza—specifically, with his critique of theocracy. Given Spinoza's canonical stature, it is scarcely surprising that the *Theologico-Political Treatise* has emerged as a touchstone in debates about whether the Jewish textual corpus includes traditions of political thought. Yet why have scholars determined to establish or refute the existence of Jewish political traditions felt compelled to revisit Spinoza's critique of theocracy, in particular?[1]

In this context, scholars have located Spinoza's significance in his putative origination of the complaint that theocracy is an "abnormal," dangerously "antipolitical" doctrine.[2] Theocracy is "antipolitical," in this view, because the assertion of divine sovereignty leaves no room for human political agency. If God is a king, a bona fide political ruler, then "what is there for human beings to do" (Walzer 2012, xii–xiii)? Having defined theocracy as the absence or refusal of politics, scholars conclude that, if Judaism is inherently theocratic, then a "Jewish political tradition" is a contradiction in terms. Thus, to establish the very possibility of Jewish political thought, scholars have felt the need to demonstrate that theocratic doctrines do not exhaust Jewish traditions. A certain understanding of theocracy, often attributed to Spinoza, has shaped the field's conceptual and political horizons.

In this article, I contest lineages that trace admonitions against theocratic "antipolitics" back to Spinoza, elaborating an alternative reading of Spinoza's critique of theocracy and, by extension, his legacy for Jewish political thought. Unlike his ostensible heirs, Spinoza does not posit a zero-sum game between divine sovereignty and human political

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1. Weiler characterizes his polemic against the existence of a Jewish political tradition as "only a footnote to Spinoza" (1988, xiv). Walzer also credits Spinoza with a pioneering critique of theocracy (2000, 167–68, 181). For a countervailing, expressly theocratic reading of Spinoza, see Novak (2015).

2. For "normal" politics, see Walzer (2012, 67–69, 71, 184) and Weiler (1988, 77, 330). For "antipolitics," see Walzer (2012, xii–xiii, 66, 88, 202, 211–12) and Weiler (1988, x, xiv, 83, 85, 130, 169, 291, 302, 326, 330–31).

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agency. Rather, when Spinoza relates the history of the ancient Hebrew theocracy, he identifies multiple constitutional arrangements consistent with divine kingship. Indeed, Spinoza classes the Hebrew state as a theocracy because in none of its instantiations does a single human ruler or assembly exercise the full prerogatives of sovereignty. In sum, Spinoza considers theocracy a distinctive regime type, and he evaluates the regime's advantages and limitations in political terms.

With this interpretation, I complicate received accounts of the work that Hebrew political history performs in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*. Influential recent scholarship situates Spinoza's excursus into biblical history within controversies surrounding clerical jurisdiction in the Dutch republic. Addressing a Protestant audience in a familiar and authoritative idiom, scholars contend, Spinoza provides a biblical warrant for the sovereign's jurisdiction over religious practice. Without necessarily denying that Spinoza adduces the Hebrew example to advance an Erastian argument, I resist the conclusion that Erastian convictions exhaust the example's force. Too often, scholars forget that medieval Jewish philosophy also informs Spinoza's approach to theocracy. My aim, in recalling Spinoza's acquaintance with medieval Jewish texts, is not merely to provide a fuller picture of Spinoza's literary and philosophical sources. My primary goal is to develop a richer understanding of Spinoza's motivating theoretical concerns. Having restored Spinoza's Jewish contexts, we can see that, as a critic of theocracy, Spinoza does not only decimate clerical authority—he also examines whether sovereignty is a sine qua non of political community. For a philosopher conventionally aligned with Hobbes, Spinoza's observations about theocracy can be surprising. On Spinoza's reading, Hebrew political history demonstrates that, under particular circumstances, it is possible to establish a polity without a functioning human sovereign.

Moreover, with a more nuanced account of Spinoza's animating concerns, we can challenge the political conclusions that scholars of Jewish thought have derived from the critique of theocracy. On familiar versions of Spinoza's legacy, the critique of theocracy secures sovereignty's status as the defining horizon of the political. Scholars have invoked Spinoza's authority as the canonical critic of theocracy to buttress a conceptual framework that makes state-centered ideologies (i.e., liberalism and political Zionism) seem like the default political options, given modern Jewish history. As we will see, Spinoza is an early and influential source for the charge that statelessness rendered Jewish politics "abnormal"—and his conception of a hypothetical political resurgence centers on the establishment of a sovereign Jewish state. Yet Spinoza's disdain for diasporic Jewish politics is not the inevitable conclusion of a devastating critique of theocracy's political bankruptcy, I contend, but is motivated by historically contingent considerations. Indeed, Spinoza appears most receptive to polities organized on principles other than absolute sovereignty when he explores theocracy's inner workings. Thus, scholars can invoke the more capacious definition of politics operative in Spinoza's history of the Hebrew theocracy to gain leverage against another part of Spinoza's work, his indictment of rabbinic Judaism. Alert to these tensions, scholars may be able do something that has proved difficult for the founding scholars of Jewish political thought—namely, to challenge sovereignty's hegemony over the Jewish political imagination. I elaborate an alternative Spinozist legacy to reinvigorate contemporary debate about sovereignty's importance for Jewish political agency.

Before I begin, a note about the word "theocracy": In contemporary discourse, theocracy tends to serve as a catch-all encompassing regimes that claim religious legitimation and/or subvert the democratic order (Flatto 2011; Weiler 1988, 146). Yet Josephus originally coined the term to illustrate unique dimensions of the Mosaic constitution—specifically, its commitment to "the formal rule of law over the personal and unpredictable governance of men" (Flatto 2011, 8). Moses departed from extant regime types, Josephus explains, by "placing all sovereignty and authority in the hands of God" (2004, 359). In what follows, I ascribe significance to the contexts in which Spinoza uses (or declines to use) the term "theocracy." I focus on the word itself because I believe that, for Spinoza as for Josephus, theocracy bears precise connotations.[3] Not every regime that claims religious legitimation counts as a theocracy, nor is theocracy synonymous with clerical rule. Rather, Spinoza classifies polities in which God is conceived as the immediate source of civil rule as theocracies. In a theocracy, subjects imagine that they have appointed God as their sovereign—and their political institutions reflect this (inadequate) belief, dividing coercive authority among multiple locations, so that no human being exercises a sovereign's full prerogative. Spinoza's insight is that theocratic convictions can inspire a decentralized approach to the design of political institutions. Extrapolating from this analysis, one can envision clerical regimes (e.g., high priest as absolute sovereign) that Spinoza would not consider theocratic.

THE HISTORY OF THE HEBREW THEOCRACY

Spinoza makes Hebrew political history a centerpiece of his argument in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, telling the story of the establishment of the biblical state in two pas-

3. For Spinoza's relationship to Josephus, see Abolafia (2014).

sages. In the first passage, in chapter 5, Spinoza adduces the Hebrew example to illustrate "general considerations" regarding the cultivation of obedience among people lacking the maturity for self-rule (2016, 145). In the second passage, in chapter 17, Spinoza classes the Hebrew state as a particular type of regime—namely, a theocracy—and he describes the regime's founding as democratic. What work does the classification of the Hebrew state as a theocracy—and the further alignment of theocracy with democracy—perform in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*?

In recent years, scholars have devoted increasing attention to Spinoza's engagement with Hebrew political history. Situating Spinoza within a Protestant context, scholars read his analysis of the Hebrew theocracy as an intervention into controversies in the Dutch Republic surrounding toleration and the extent of clerical jurisdiction. On this view, Spinoza exploits the authority of the Hebrew example for Dutch Protestants to press home an argument about the proper configuration of civil and religious authority (James 2012, 294–303; Rosenthal 1997; Schwartz 1985; Smith 1997; Verbeek 1999). The message that Spinoza would convey by adopting a biblical idiom, according to these scholars, is an Erastian brief for civil supremacy. "Addressing his audience in the only language they would understand, Spinoza uses the story of Moses at Sinai to urge both the subordination of the clergy to secular control and the toleration of religious heterodoxy as necessary for the welfare of the state" (Smith 1997, 147). Just as Moses retained jurisdiction over matters religious, so the Dutch sovereign should retain jurisdiction over religious practice (while confining law's reach to the realm of action). Although Spinoza is not the lone Dutch theorist to treat "the Hebrew constitution as an embodiment of the Erastian ideal," Spinoza deploys the Hebrew example in contrarian ways, debunking his contemporaries' theological assumptions and resisting many of their political conclusions (Nelson 2010, 130; see also Abolafia 2014; Boralevi 2002; James 2012, 264–69).

The depiction of Spinoza as a heterodox Erastian has achieved scholarly currency because it captures key facets of Spinoza's investment in the Hebrew example. Scholars are not wrong to foreground Spinoza's denial of independent clerical authority—indeed, they echo Spinoza's express statements regarding which features of the Hebrew state "are at least well-worth noting, and perhaps imitating" (2016, 323). Hebrew political history shows "how necessary it is, both for the Republic and for religion, to grant the supreme powers the right to distinguish between what is permissible and what is not" (328).

Yet Dutch Protestantism is not the only context that informs Spinoza's analysis of theocracy, nor do Erastian arguments exhaust the example's force. As Fraenkel has demonstrated, Spinoza also engages with theocratic strands of medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy (2012). For Maimonides—one of Spinoza's primary critical targets in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*—the well-ordered community "is best described as a *theocracy*, a community ruled by God" (Fraenkel 2012, 6). What makes a regime theocratic, in the tradition in which Maimonides participates, is not the rule of a particular social group (i.e., clerics), but the achievement of rational order. "A rationally ordered democracy, for example, would also count as a theocracy on this view" (7). Indeed, "in the ideal theocracy . . . God's rule and self-rule coincide," with the result that formal governmental institutions are rendered superfluous (7). Given the preponderance of nonphilosophers, however, this ideal remains unattainable. In nonideal theocracies, legal and pedagogical institutions are required to sustain rational order. For Spinoza's medieval predecessors, the debate surrounding theocracy does not turn on the extent of clerical jurisdiction or the balance of power between religion and state. Rather, the animating questions are whether divine sovereignty is consistent with human autonomy and whether acknowledgment of divine rule enables communities to dispense with standard political institutions.[4]

I have recalled Spinoza's familiarity with medieval theocratic traditions to direct attention to the neglected facets of Spinoza's excursus into Hebrew history. Scholars who fixate on Spinoza's "Hebraism" have overlooked his engagement with questions akin to those that exercised medieval Jewish philosophers—questions about the viability of polities organized on principles other than absolute sovereignty. Scholars have neglected these facets of Spinoza's argument because they have not devoted sufficient attention to the function of Spinoza's regime typology within the *Theologico-Political Treatise*.[5] Spinoza does not need the notion of theocracy as a distinctive regime type—let alone the association of theocracy with democracy—to defend the sovereign's jurisdiction over "the external practice of religion" (2016, 333). If Spinoza's sole aim, in relating Hebrew history, were to provide a biblical imprimatur for civil supremacy, he could advance this project by interpreting the Sinai covenant as conferring sovereignty on Moses (as he does in chap. 5, where the term "theocracy" does not appear).

4. Curiously, Fraenkel neither cites nor analyzes passages in which Spinoza uses the term "theocracy" to describe the protean regime that governed the Hebrews from the Sinai covenant through the appointment of Saul. As a result, Fraenkel mistakenly implies that, like Maimonides before him, Spinoza was a proponent of theocracy.

5. Although see Abolafia (2014, 309–12).

Yet Spinoza also depicts the Sinai covenant as the founding of a theocracy. As we will see, it is the lack of a functioning human sovereign, more than the scope of clerical jurisdiction, which makes this regime a theocracy. In Spinoza's lexicon, theocracy signifies a distinctive political aspiration: the aspiration to establish a polity in which God is the immediate source of mundane civil rule. In the grips of an inadequate, anthropomorphic theology, the Hebrews imagine that they have appointed God as their sovereign—which, in practice, means that they try to build political community without an absolute human ruler.

Once we understand theocracy in these terms, we can read chapter 17 as an assessment of the feasibility of establishing political community without a functioning human sovereign. Spinoza is not a theocrat—he expressly cautions against the establishment of a modern theocracy. Yet Spinoza's objections do not locate theocracy below the threshold of the political. Indeed, when Spinoza evaluates theocracy's viability, he concedes that a polity can attain relative stability under imperfect sovereignty when subjects imagine God as their king.

To appreciate the significance of Spinoza's regime typology, we must compare the two renditions of the Sinai covenant. On the first rendition, in chapter 5, Spinoza sets out to explain the rationale for the Hebrews' observance of "ceremonies"—and thereby prove their obsolescence after "the destruction of their state [*imperium*]" (2016, 142).[6] After the exodus, Spinoza relates, the Hebrews were without political obligations, free to establish their own polity. Given the Hebrews' manifest incapacity for "being their own masters," however, democracy was not a live option—"sovereignty [*imperium*] had to remain in the hands of one person only" (2016, 145, 146). This man was Moses, whose firm grip on Israelite imagination stemmed from his religious charisma. "Moses was easily able to retain this sovereignty [*imperium*], because he excelled the others in divine power, persuaded the people that he had it, and showed this by a great deal of evidence" (145). Here, Spinoza dates the founding of the Hebrew commonwealth to the conferral of sovereignty on Moses, and he ascribes the commonwealth's stability to Moses' deft manipulation of religious affect. Having reduced Hebrew ceremonial to an instrument of statecraft, Spinoza concludes that, "after their state [*imperium*] was dissolved the Jews were no more bound by the law of Moses than they were before their social order and Republic began" (142).

Significantly, the word "theocracy" does not appear in chapter 5, which characterizes the Hebrew state as one in which "one person alone holds sovereignty [*imperium*] absolutely" (Spinoza 2016, 145). At no point does Spinoza depict the Hebrews as determined to appoint God, rather than a human being, as their king. On the evidence of this chapter, the Israelites do not consider God their sovereign, although Moses invokes God for purposes of mystification and legitimation.

In chapter 17, by contrast, Spinoza introduces the term "theocracy" to capture the constitutional arrangements of the Hebrew state. On Spinoza's second rendition, the Sinai covenant represents an experiment, inspired by theological conviction, at building political community without human rule. Upon liberation from Egyptian bondage, the Israelites returned to a "natural condition," with each individual at liberty to retain or transfer his natural rights (2016, 301). At Moses' prompting, the emancipated Hebrews "decided to transfer their right only to God, not to any mortal" (301). Spinoza calls the resulting regime a theocracy, explaining that, "its citizens weren't bound by any law except the one revealed by God" (302). Here, as in chapter 5, Spinoza asserts the identity of civil and religious law.[7] In chapter 17, however, the identity of civil and religious law reflects the Hebrews' determination to be governed directly by God. Indeed, Spinoza introduces a notion absent from the previous account, namely, that divine kingship is a distinguishing feature of the Hebrew state. "God alone, then, had sovereignty [*imperium*] over the Hebrews. By the force of the covenant, this [state] alone was rightly called the Kingdom of God, and God was rightly called also the King of the Hebrews" (302).

A brief comparison with Hobbes's interpretation of Hebrew history, in *De Cive*, can illuminate the distinctive concerns that motivate Spinoza's regime typology. On Hobbes's narrative, the Sinai covenant is inspired by disgruntlement with human rule. "Then later when that people had halted in the desert near Mount Sinai, and was not only wholly free but also totally hostile to human subjection because of their recent experience of Egyptian slavery, it was proposed that they should all renew the *old Agreement*" (2000,

6. Curley distinguishes two meanings of the Latin term "*imperium*." *Imperium* refers to an "organized political society" (translated as "state") (Spinoza 2016, 659). But *imperium* also refers to "the person or collective which has the right or power to make final decisions, or to the power that person or body has" (translated as "sovereign," "sovereignty," "command," "control," "rule") (Spinoza 2016, 659). Throughout, references to the Latin original are from the Gebhardt edition (Spinoza 1925).

7. For Erastian themes in chapters 17 and 18, see Spinoza (2016, 302, 320–21, 323–24, 336–37). The unity of civil and religious law is not, however, a sufficient criterion for classifying a regime as theocratic. A state in which religious and civil law are identical, but a human being exercises the full prerogatives of sovereignty, is not a theocracy.

191). Conjecturing about the psychology of oppression, Hobbes imputes an emancipatory impulse to the Hebrews. The Hebrews believe that accepting divine sovereignty offers a way to escape human subjection. Yet, in Hobbes's narrative, there is never a moment of direct divine rule. Under the Sinai covenant, the Hebrews receive God's law through prophetic mediation, "by the hand of Moses" (192). Indeed, Hobbes depicts Moses as a paradigmatic Erastian sovereign: "*Moses* was the sole *interpreter of God's word*, and also held sovereign power in civil matters" (196; see also Hobbes 1996, 326). Thus, on Hobbes's rendition, accepting God's kingship does not actually exempt the Hebrews from human subjection—they remain subject to Moses, who serves as God's representative. Moreover, Hobbes's primary aim, in relating this narrative, is to establish that the same Erastian arrangement prevailed in every period of Hebrew history. "And therefore so far forth as concerneth the Old Testament, we may conclude, that whosoever had the Sovereignty of the Common-wealth amongst the Jews, the same had also the Supreme Authority in matter of God's external worship; and represented God's person" (1996, 331; see also Hobbes 2000, 197, 199). Although Hobbes appears cognizant of anti-authoritarian resonances within the biblical narrative, he effectively closes off the possibility that one can escape human subjection by affirming divine sovereignty. On Hobbes's interpretation, the kingdom of God does not constitute an idiosyncratic political regime—nor does he use the word "theocracy."

In chapter 17, by contrast, Spinoza pursues the possibility that Hobbes tacitly denies. Classing the regime as a theocracy, Spinoza explores whether imagining God as a king allows the Hebrews to avoid human subjection, and he evaluates the institutional arrangements characteristic of a regime that forgoes absolute human rule. If Hobbes domesticates the Bible's anti-authoritarian thrust, Spinoza claims that the image of God as a king can sponsor an inadvertent but radical form of democracy. Spinoza arrives at this claim by drawing out implications of the view that, in a kingdom of God properly so called, civil sovereignty is a divine prerogative. Departing from Hobbes's narrative in *De Cive* and his own rendition in chapter 5, Spinoza dates the polity's founding to the Hebrews' attempt to transfer their rights directly to God, without Mosaic mediation. Spinoza adopts two vantage points on this attempt—he both reports the Hebrews' self-understanding and translates the Sinai covenant into a naturalistic idiom (see James 2012, 270). Viewed through a naturalistic lens, Spinoza explains, "all these things existed more in opinion than in fact. Really the Hebrews retained the right of the state [*imperii*] absolutely" (2016, 302–3). Because the Hebrews did not actually transfer their rights to God, and God did not actually rule as their king, the covenant placed individuals in a situation akin to that of a democracy: "The Hebrews didn't transfer their right to anyone else, but everyone surrendered his right equally, as in a Democracy, and they cried out in one voice 'whatever God says' (without any explicit mediator) 'we will do.' It follows that everyone remained completely equal by this covenant, that the right to consult God, and to receive and interpret his laws, was equal for everyone. Everyone held the whole administration of the state [*imperii*] equally, without qualification" (2016, 303; see also 334–35).

Spinoza's alignment of theocracy with democracy follows from his rejection of an anthropomorphic God. Spinoza gestures toward this rejection (developed more fully in the *Ethics*) in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, where he equates "God's guidance" with "the fixed and immutable order of nature, or the connection of natural things" (2016, 112; see also 154, 282, 336). Because God is not a being with whom one can enter into relationships or to whom one can transfer rights, the Hebrews' transfer "was more in thought than in deed" (2016, 335). Although the Hebrews imagine that they have entered into a relationship of subjection to God, they have in fact retained their rights in common. In Balibar's gloss, "in handing over all power to God, the Hebrews were keeping it away from any particular man or men" (1998, 47).

In principle, imagining God as a king can inspire egalitarian deliberation. In practice, however, the experiment in direct divine rule is a fleeting episode. Alluding to Exodus 20: 15–18, Spinoza explains that, when "everyone equally went to God the first time to hear what he wanted to command," they were frightened by the pyrotechnics of the theophany and relinquished their right of equal access, granting Moses the "right to consult God and interpret his edicts" (2016, 303). Once appointed as prophetic intermediary, Moses holds "the supreme majesty" and "the supreme right," exercising "the whole administration of the state [*imperii*]" (2016, 303–4). The brevity of the Hebrews' initial covenant appears to confirm the verdict, pronounced in chapter 5, that "they were quite incapable of establishing legislation wisely and keeping the sovereignty [*imperium*] in their own hands, as a body" (145). Yet Spinoza's narrative, in chapter 17, does not merely elaborate upon the historical, social, and psychological conditions that necessitated Moses' rule. The designation of the regime as a theocracy casts Moses' rule in a new light, as one chapter in the story of the Hebrews' attempt to found a worldly polity under divine sovereignty.

If chapter 5 draws a sharp distinction between the Mosaic constitution and democratic self-rule, chapter 17 depicts the Hebrew theocracy as an experiment (albeit unwitting) in

something akin to democracy. With the classification of the regime as a theocracy, Spinoza casts Hebrew political history as an (unconscious and in many respects misguided) attempt to embody modes of association that, when pursued under more felicitous circumstances, he endorses. In its earliest instantiation, the Hebrew theocracy lacks coercive institutions. "Despite their symbolic allegiance to God," the Hebrews "were not effectively bound by any edicts" (James 2012, 272). When the Hebrews seek a direct political relationship with God, they experiment with a prospect that Spinoza entertains in a counterfactual, the prospect of community without coercion. A community of consummate philosophers could dispense with law, Spinoza contends, because rational men will cooperate without the threat of sanctions. "Now if nature had so constituted men that they desired nothing except what true reason teaches them to desire, then of course a society could exist without laws; in that case it would be completely sufficient to teach men true moral lessons, so that they would do voluntarily, wholeheartedly, and in a manner worthy of a free man, what is really useful" (2016, 144; see also Spinoza 1994, IVP71D, IVP37S1, IVP18S). Yet men are constituted otherwise. As Spinoza proceeds to explain, coercion is necessary because humans are not perfectly rational: "It's true that everyone seeks his own advantage—but people want things and judge them useful, not by the dictate of sound reason but for the most part only from immoderate desire and because they are carried away by affects of mind which take no account of the future and of other things. That's why no society can continue in existence without authority [*imperio*] and force, and hence, laws which moderate and restrain men's immoderate desires and unchecked impulses" (2016, 144; see also 286; Spinoza 1994, IVP37S2).

Juxtaposing the Hebrew state with this passage—which echoes medieval Jewish and Islamic traditions—gives us a better sense of what theocracy signifies and why the regime warrants analysis and critique (see Fraenkel 2012, 239–45). The Hebrews use a political vocabulary to articulate an aspiration that is properly ethical—available, if at all, only to those who reject an anthropomorphic God. With the narrative of the first covenant's abrogation, Spinoza criticizes the Hebraic aspiration in its original form. As their reliance on Moses attests, the Hebrews cannot make do without law and coercion. In its original form, the theocratic aspiration arguably betrays "antipolitical" tendencies—for the Hebrews would forsake mundane governmental institutions. In Spinoza's telling, however, an episode that begins with the refusal of human authority quickly turns into a unique project for the institution of coercion. On Spinoza's rendition, imagining God as a king allows the Hebrews to escape human dominion while establishing a polity that, if not ideal, nevertheless remains stable for quite some time.

THEOCRACY'S FLEXIBILITY

On the reading that I have elaborated—in which theocracy names a distinctive political aspiration, more than a commitment to clerical rule—the convoluted story that Spinoza proceeds to relate about the state's constitutional transformations illustrates theocracy's political flexibility. Indeed, precisely because "theocracy" signifies an aspiration to "freedom from human dominion [*imperii*]," it is a dynamic regime that affords multiple possibilities for constitutional design (Spinoza 2016, 314). On Spinoza's narrative, the drama of Hebrew political history derives from the attempt to create functioning institutions without usurping divine sovereignty.

Spinoza's history unfolds in roughly four stages, each of which illustrates a different variety of theocratic governance.[8] In the first and briefest stage, the Hebrews forsake human rule for direct divine sovereignty and then appoint Moses as mediator when confronted with the daunting reality of what their experiment entails. In the second stage, Moses controls "the whole administration of the state [*imperii*]," exercising "all the functions of the supreme power" (Spinoza 2016, 304; see also 323).[9] Had Moses appointed a successor who exercised "all the functions of the supreme power," the state would have "been nothing more than a monarchy" (304). Yet the Hebrew state remains a theocracy, on Spinoza's classification, because Moses neglects to appoint a successor who retains ultimate jurisdiction in all areas of communal life. "But Moses chose no such successor. Instead he left the state [*imperium*] to be administered by his successors in such a way that it couldn't be called either popular, or aristocratic, or monarchic, but Theocratic" (304; see also 310, 339, 343). Thus, in the regime's third stage, Aaron and the Levites interpret God's decrees, while Joshua executes them. This division of labor and authority renders the regime a theocracy, on Spinoza's definition, because no human being exercises a sovereign's complete prerogative. After the death of Joshua, who served as commander in chief, the regime enters a fourth phase, that of a tribal federation,

8. For alternative periodizations, see Abolafia (2014, 311) and James (2012, 269). I echo Beiner, although I take issue with his suggestion that some phases of Hebrew history are more theocratic than others. See Beiner (2011, 127, 137).

9. Spinoza equivocates on whether the state remains theocratic during Moses' reign. In several passages, Spinoza ascribes sovereignty to Moses, which ascription appears to transform the state into a monarchy (2016, 303, 307, 323). Yet Spinoza also states that the Hebrews "completely broke away from the divine law" only in the time of Samuel, implying that God remains sovereign during the Mosaic period (2016, 320; see also 325).

in which each tribe constitutes an independent jurisdiction for purposes other than religious ritual. The theocratic period ends with the appointment of a human king in the time of Samuel.

In Spinoza's narrative, the doctrine of divine sovereignty sponsors multiple forms of human politics. In the space of several pages, the Hebrew theocracy has morphed from a participatory democracy, into a quasi-monarchy, into a regime that divides authority between priests and military leaders, and, finally, into a tribal federation. Despite differences in their constitutional arrangements, Spinoza insists, these regimes are all theocratic, because they couple affirmation of divine sovereignty with dispersal of jurisdiction—no human being exercises a sovereign's complete prerogative (see Verbeek 1999, 328). On Spinoza's definition, sovereignty is a "supreme"—and therefore unitary—power (2016, 287). As Spinoza explains, the founding contract affords the sovereign the "supreme right over everything in its power. From this it follows that no law binds the supreme power. Everyone must obey it in everything. For everyone had to agree to this, either tacitly or explicitly, when they transferred to the supreme power all their power to defend themselves, i.e., all their right" (287). In short, Spinoza contends that, "only those who have sovereignty [*imperium*] have a right to do all things, and that all law depends solely on their decree" (332). What makes the Hebrew state a theocracy is the absence of such a human power. In a community whose members imagined God as their king, the management of affairs "didn't all depend on the decision of one man, or of one council, or the people" (310). The identity of civil and religious law notwithstanding, in its later phases, the theocracy divided authority between priests and military leaders. "For one person [Aaron and the Levites] had the right of interpreting the laws and of communicating God's replies, and another [Joshua and the military captains] had the right and power to administer the state [*imperium*] according to the laws already explained and the replies already communicated" (304–5). Moreover, after Joshua's death, the members of one tribe viewed the members of other tribes as fellow citizens "in relation to God and Religion," but in all other respects, they were members of a confederation, in which each tribal captain retained military, legislative, and foreign policy jurisdiction (308). With this narrative of constitutional transformation, Spinoza suggests that a people which imagines God as their king can both honor that commitment and create functioning political institutions by dividing authority among multiple parties.[10]

In short, Spinoza never dismisses theocracy as utterly "unsuitable as the foundation of a state," even though he disdains the conception of God on which the enterprise rests (Weiler 1988, 89). Indeed, Spinoza devotes several pages to the regime's strengths, its ability to "restrain both rulers and the ruled, so that the ruled did not become rebels and the rulers did not become Tyrants" (2016, 310). When explaining the Hebrews' impressive social cohesion, this proponent of absolute sovereignty concedes that divided authority was one source of political stability.[11] Thus, Spinoza credits the division of authority between priests and captains with checking the propensity of those in power to "try to cover up whatever crimes they commit under the appearance of legality and to persuade the people that they've acted honestly" (310–11). Admittedly, Spinoza takes pains to remind readers that priestly interpretations of God's word acquired the force of law through secular mediation. When the state was stable, religious authority was subordinate—priests "had no right to make [religious] decrees, but only to give God's answers when asked to do so by the rulers or the councils" (324). Yet priests were not docile functionaries. Indeed, "giving the whole right to interpret the laws to the Levites" limited the captains' scope for tyranny and transgression (311). Moreover, the Hebrews' unshakable loyalty and martial zeal derived from the chauvinist belief that "their kingdom was God's kingdom, that they alone were God's children, and that the other nations were God's enemies" (313). Granted, Spinoza also traces the regime's stability to policies that are independent of theocratic convictions, such as the ban on mercenaries and the security of private property rights. Yet institutions in which "no one was subject to his equal; everyone was subject only to God" make a significant contribution to the state's viability (315).

I have lingered on Spinoza's enumeration of the regime's strengths not to imply that Spinoza is a theocrat but to clarify the substance and force of his objections. The charge of "antipolitics" plays a negligible role in Spinoza's critique. In chapter 17, affirmation of divine sovereignty neither justifies nor encourages abdication of responsibility for communal affairs. Moreover, the political missteps that account for theocracy's eventual demise appear unrelated to its doc-

10. Scholars have argued that the theocracy remains democratic through all of its permutations. See Hammill (2012); James (2012, 270, 274); and (Verbeek 1999, 332–33). This interpretation honors Spinoza's contention that the Hebrews' transfer of right to God was "more in thought than in deed," and it accords with Spinoza's periodization of Hebrew history (2016, 335; see also 325). Yet it does not account for the way the state was governed. Spinoza expressly states that, after Moses' death, "these things didn't all depend on the decision of one man, or of one council, or of the people" (2016, 310).

11. Spinoza's account of the institutional composition of an "absolute" regime, in the *Political Treatise*, makes these concessions less surprising. See Justin Steinberg, "Spinoza on Political Absolutism" (forthcoming).

trinal underpinnings.[12] One might conclude that the regime was doomed to fail, on Spinoza's view, because it presupposed a false conception of God. When Spinoza narrates the state's demise, however, he blames structural flaws that are independent of the Hebrews' theocratic convictions. On Spinoza's diagnosis, the potential for instability emerged with the transfer, after the golden calf incident, of "the whole of the sacred ministry" from the firstborn of each tribe to the Levites, which transfer bred seditious resentment among the tribes, arrogance among the Levites, and, in the monarchic period, competition between kings and clerics (2016, 318). Here, the fatal flaw is neither the doctrine of divine sovereignty nor the division of jurisdiction between priests and captains (which was part of the original constitution). Rather, Spinoza objects to the monopolization of ritual authority by the Levite tribe—which monopolization creates a priestly caste that, after the appointment of Saul, emerges as a seditious "state within a state [*imperium in imperio*]" (320–21). Indeed, Spinoza allows that stability would have been possible under the Hebrews' original (theocratic) constitution: "But if the Republic had been constituted in accordance with [God's] first intention, the right and honor would always have been equal among all the tribes, and everything would have been arranged most securely" (319; see also 321, 322). In Spinoza's narrative, clerical rule is a contingent historical development, rather than a necessary entailment of theocratic doctrines.[13] Although Spinoza criticizes constitutional decisions taken at a particular juncture, he does not deny theocracy's feasibility. If the Hebrews had maintained their original constitution, their "sovereignty [*imperium*] could have been everlasting" (321).

Thus, on my reading, the narrative of the state's decline is less an exposé of theocracy's political bankruptcy, than a caution regarding the historical, institutional, and affective conditions for a viable theocratic regime. On Spinoza's narration, the doctrine of divine sovereignty is susceptible to a variety of political interpretations. Admittedly, people who imagine God as a king are not sufficiently sophisticated to sustain the image's most egalitarian interpretation—hence the brevity of the Hebrews' original covenant. Rationality is a condition for a truly egalitarian community, the community of free men, which dispenses with law and coercion. Yet the fact that the theocracy eventually degenerates into an unstable monarchy does not constitute an indictment of imaginative politics *tout court*.[14] Throughout the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Spinoza ascribes binding force to historical narratives, emotional attachments, and inadequate ideas. Spinoza reserves a political role for imagination even in democracy, whose "foundation and end" are "to confine men within the limits of reason, as far as possible, so that they may live harmoniously and peacefully" (2016, 288). "As far as possible" is a key phrase. Given that "it's far from true that everyone can always be easily led just by the guidance of reason," there is no such thing as politics purified of imagination (286). Indeed, Spinoza's pessimism about the prospects for mass enlightenment leads him to countenance the dissemination of inadequate ideas (e.g., "God pardons the sins of those who repent") conducive to political stability (269). Nor is mass enlightenment necessary—for pious beliefs inspire obedience irrespective of their truth (see 267). Thus, in its reliance on the binding power of inadequate ideas, theocracy is not "completely different in kind to democracies founded on reason" (Gatens and Lloyd 1999, 125). Admittedly, from Spinoza's perspective, there are more enabling images than the image of God as king. Yet the image is not invariably subversive of political agency and community, nor is it inherently hierarchical. When Hebrew institutions reflected, to some degree, the egalitarian aspiration to "freedom from human dominion [*imperium*]," the state achieved a high degree of cohesion (2016, 314).

SPINOZA AND MODERN JEWISH POLITICS

Of course, the recognition that theocratic regimes can be relatively stable does not commit one to endorse theocracy. Indeed, Spinoza hopes to dissuade contemporary readers from embracing theocracy. Instead of locating theocracy below the threshold of the political, however, Spinoza critiques theocracy as a competing mode of politics. Thus, Spinoza delivers his verdict against theocracy via a (cursory and somewhat tendentious) argument for the inconsistency of theocratic politics with contemporary theological and commercial sensibilities. Spinoza concludes his narrative with the caveat that, while the theocracy "could have lasted forever, nevertheless no one can imitate it now. Nor is this even advisable" (2016, 322). Given Spinoza's repeated concession to the regime's viability, we should hesitate before reading the injunction against imitation as the culmination of a devastating exposé of theocracy's sterility. Rather, Spinoza conjures a community for whom even politically robust forms of theocracy—"insofar as we've conceived it to be durable"—prove unattractive (322). Spinoza's intended audience should renounce theocracy, he implies, given their covenantal theology. Invoking Paul, Spinoza re-

12. Here I follow Verbeek (1999, 330).

13. Indeed, according to Spinoza, the most intensely clerical period in Hebrew history was the monarchic period (from Saul onward) (see 2016, 320–22). That is, clerical power reached its apogee after the demise of the theocracy, at a moment when the state had become a standard issue monarchy.

14. Here I follow Gatens and Lloyd (1999, 123, 125–26).

minds readers that, "God, however, has revealed through his Apostles that his covenant is no longer written with ink, or on stone tablets, but written on the heart, by the spirit of God" (322). That is, apostolic doctrine approximates to Spinoza's position regarding the impossibility of transferring rights directly to God. Here, Spinoza reminds Christians that, by their own lights, theocracy is anachronistic. Under the apostolic dispensation, human sovereignty is required for the realization of God's kingdom: "God has no special kingdom over men except through those who have sovereignty [*imperium*]" (333).

If theocracy is not a coherent political aspiration for those who uphold the spirit against the letter, nor is it an appealing prospect for proponents of commerce. Theocracy "couldn't be at all useful for those to whom it's necessary to have dealings with others," Spinoza contends, because, as Hebrew history attests, it fosters chauvinism and xenophobia (Spinoza 2016, 323; see Smith 1997, 152, 163–65). Although theocracy might suffice for "those who are willing to live by themselves, alone, without any foreign trade, shutting themselves up within their own boundaries, and segregating themselves from the rest of the world" Spinoza presumes a readership accustomed to international commerce and market relations (2016, 322–23).

Spinoza's admonition against imitation is less a decision for politics than a political decision about the kind of community that "we" want to inhabit. And it is not accidental, I would argue, that Spinoza invokes apostolic theology when conjuring the constituency for whom theocracy, no matter how robust, is an anachronism. Spinoza's judgment against theocracy rests on a diagnosis of present political desiderata, and, thus defined, the present moment is one in which the communal obligations of rabbinic Judaism do not register as political. Spinoza's significance for the study of Jewish political thought derives, in part, from his historical location, at a moment when ideals of state sovereignty become increasingly hegemonic. The *Theologico-Political Treatise* illustrates the challenge that this hegemony poses for understanding Jewish political history and the constraints that it places on Jewish political imagination. Spinoza's brief for democracy includes a reinterpretation of Hebrew history and a polemic against medieval Jewish exegesis (see chaps. 7 and 15). Yet Spinoza does not confine his analysis to the Jewish past. Spinoza also exposes what he sees as the adverse consequences of rabbinic traditions for the political standing of modern Jews.[15] In these passages, Spinoza offers an early iteration of the charge that there is something "abnormal" about maintaining the trappings of political community (e.g., Jewish law) in the absence of a Jewish state.

In a framework, such as Spinoza's, organized around absolute (albeit democratic) sovereignty, there are two conceivable ways for modern Jews to exercise political agency: individuals can identify as citizens in their states of residence, or Jews can mobilize collectively to establish a Jewish state. Spinoza defends the first possibility—citizenship in a democratic republic that accommodates a wide spectrum of opinion and belief—throughout the *Theologico-Political Treatise* (see Smith 1997). Spinoza entertains the latter prospect in a much-remarked passage: "Indeed, if the foundations of their religion did not make their hearts unmanly [*effoeminarent*], I would absolutely believe that some day, given the opportunity, they would set up their state [*imperium*] again, and God would choose them anew" (2016, 124). This passage appears at the end of chapter 3, in which Spinoza denies that the Jews are chosen in any metaphysical or supernatural sense. Thus, Spinoza uses the language of divine election ironically, echoing his earlier claim that nations are "chosen," or distinguished from one another, solely with respect to the soundness of their political institutions (see 2016, 114). For our purposes, the passage is important for what it reveals about the contours of a sovereign political imaginary. Spinoza is able to envision forms of political mobilization that were scarcely conceivable for his Jewish predecessors and peers.[16] Yet the flip side of Spinoza's ability to envision the establishment of something like a Jewish nation-state is his denial of political dignity to rabbinic Judaism. For a proponent of absolute sovereignty, the fact that Jews have maintained national identity "for many years, in spite of being scattered and without a state [*imperio*]" registers as pathology ("effeminacy"), rather than an expression of political vitality (124). Given remarks like these, it is scarcely surprising that scholars of Jewish thought have concluded that, "Spinoza, following Thomas Hobbes, anticipates (and hopes for) a time when a unified, sovereign state would be the only type of political authority" (Batnitzky 2011, 3–4).

One of my aims, in revisiting Spinoza's critique of theocracy, has been to foreground the tension between Spi-

15. Spinoza's interpretation of modern Jewish history turns, in part, on the political consequences of antisemitism. Thus, "the hatred of the Nations" is a key factor explaining the Jews' persistence after 70 CE (2016, 124). Comparing the policies of the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal, Spinoza observes that Jewish converts to Catholicism were completely assimilated in the country that granted them full civic rights (Spain), while they retained a separate identity in Portugal, where they faced continued discrimination. Yet Spinoza also blames his Jewish contemporaries' political pathology on isolationist tendencies and enfeebling religious practices (2016, 124–25). Although I consider Spinoza an analyst of modern Jewish politics, I do not mean to suggest that he consciously sought to intervene in internal Jewish debates or solve the seventeenth-century Jewish problem. On this point, I differ from Smith (1997).

16. Although see Pines (1963–64).

noza's reading of Hebrew history and his peremptory dismissal of rabbinic Jews' political standing. When Spinoza analyzes theocracy, he evaluates the political claims of polities organized on principles other than those of absolute sovereignty. Compared to Hobbes, Spinoza exhibits striking curiosity about alternative configurations of coercive power. The conceptual resources that Spinoza employs to explain Hebrew political flourishing are arguably capable of capturing political dynamics of diasporic Jewish communities, because they recognize overlapping sources of authority and local forms of coercion. When it comes to modern Jews, however, Spinoza declines to employ this theoretical and exegetical repertoire. In this sense, scholars who dismiss Judaism as "antipolitical" are not wrong to claim a Spinozist patrimony (see Weiler 1988, 85, 331). Against these scholars, however, I do not read Spinoza's disregard for the political agency of diasporic Jews as the ineluctable conclusion of his critique of theocracy. If anything, the critique of theocracy holds out the prospect of a more capacious definition of politics, one that captures dynamics of nonsovereign polities. On Spinoza's account, theocracy affords a different kind of politics—anachronistic, in his judgment, but a politics nonetheless. Read in this way, the critique of theocracy could provide leverage to scholars who would redeem rabbinic Judaism from Spinoza's aspersions, for it provides an example of how one might evaluate the political claims of nonsovereign polities. By adapting Spinoza's methods as an analyst of nonsovereign polities, scholars can challenge his conclusions about the political appeal, for modern readers, of theocratic and diasporic regimes. Spinoza bases his admonition against imitation on the presumed values of his audience. Contemporary scholars who address, and hope to constitute, a different kind of audience can "imitate" Spinoza by reevaluating sovereignty's advantages, relative to present political desiderata, over concepts and institutions inherited from diasporic traditions.

AN ALTERNATIVE SPINOZIST LEGACY

Thus far, however, scholars of Jewish politics have not undertaken a sufficiently searching examination of sovereignty's contribution to Jewish political agency. Dating to the late 1980s, initiatives for the study of Jewish political thought are largely the work of scholars seeking to furnish the State of Israel (and, to a lesser extent, the North American diaspora) with an indigenous political discourse. From the outset, the field has been marked by profound ambivalence about whether one can or should conceive of politics without sovereignty (see Cooper 2016). On the one hand, scholars have recognized that, in order to validate Jewish political traditions—which include diasporic and theocratic strands—one must challenge the received "association of politics with the state" (Walzer 2000, xxi). Indeed, scholars invested in the existence of a tradition and its continuity in dispersion have asserted that, "politics is pervasive, with or without state sovereignty" (2000, xxi). On the other hand, enthusiasm for Jewish political achievements is tempered by a nagging suspicion that traditional alternatives to state sovereignty are either inadequate or positively dangerous.

As Walzer's work illustrates, these reservations are especially pronounced when scholars confront theocratic doctrines—whose deviation from the sovereignty paradigm reflects foundational theological commitments rather than contingent historical circumstances. In Walzer's lexicon, theocracy is associated less with clerical rule than with the conviction, which finds canonical expression in I Samuel 8, "that only God should rule in Israel" (2012, 59). Like Spinoza, Walzer identifies the impulse to establish a direct political relationship with God as foundational for Hebrew (and Jewish) politics. Unlike Spinoza, however, Walzer insists that "the doctrine of God's earthly kingdom is an apolitical doctrine: it denies autonomy to political actors" (66). While Spinoza recognizes multiple possibilities for political organization in the absence of a functioning human sovereign, Walzer contends that theocracy precludes politics altogether, precisely because it leaves no room for bona fide (human) sovereignty: "The reason for this largely missing politics probably lies in the religious culture itself, in the powerful idea of divine sovereignty. In a sense, every political regime was potentially in competition with the rule of God. 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" (202).

Having conflated "full" sovereignty with "human politics," Walzer warns that theocratic doctrines have compromised Jewish political culture (2012, 202). On Walzer's view, "the belief in God's sovereignty and in his historical engagement" either encourages the abdication of politics, or it "works to turn radical aspiration into messianism: it leaves little room, even in domestic society, for everyday political action" (211; see also 184). Here, lack of appreciation for the variety of human political arrangements consistent with divine sovereignty—some of them quite mundane—leads Walzer to embrace sovereignty as a necessary bulwark against Judaism's supposed political "pathologies" (212). When Walzer writes as a critic of theocracy, he adopts a definition of politics that, by his own admission, threatens to render the idea of a Jewish political tradition incoherent. In short, a misapprehension about theocracy has inhibited vigorous debate on what Walzer considers "the central question of Jewish political thought: Just how important is sovereignty, independence, and authoritative direction?" (124).

Surveying the disciplinary landscape, it often seems like Jewish thought remains captivated by an interpretive frame in which sovereignty is both the "normal" way of organizing a polity and normatively required for the achievement of self-rule. This framework enshrines liberalism and political Zionism as the default political ideologies. If "Spinoza anticipates (and hopes for) a time when a unified, sovereign state would be the only type of political authority," then one can call this organization of the field Spinozist (Batnitzky 2011, 3–4). Such a designation is not without foundation, reflecting key facets of Spinoza's legacy as an observer of modern Judaism. However, on the reading that I have elaborated, the current organization of the field does not reflect the most nuanced version of Spinoza's legacy, especially if the Spinoza whom one invokes is the critic of theocracy. Spinoza is sensitive to political dynamics of theocracy in ways that his professed heirs—both liberal and Zionist—are not. Although often hailed as the patron saint of Jewish secularism, Spinoza does not depict a God who is conjured by a community, and whose jurisdiction includes politics, as an especially dangerous God.

My goal, in reevaluating Spinoza's legacy, has been to retrieve theoretical insights about the political fecundity of theocratic imagery and the enabling conditions for nonsovereign polities, and thereby advance debate about sovereignty's political "importance." At first glance, Spinoza seems like a curious figure to recruit for such a project. Yet, precisely because of his cachet as the supposed founder of liberalism and/or Zionism, Spinoza is a crucial figure to confront if we want to reinvigorate debate regarding whether sovereignty is the optimal solution to the "Jewish question." An interpretation that recasts Spinoza's contribution, as a critic of theocracy, can inspire reconsideration of questions long thought settled. This project is modest, in the sense that I do not seek to derive an institutional template for a contemporary Jewish theocracy. Indeed, I do not defend theocracy—or nonsovereign polities more generally. Such a defense is beyond the scope of this article. The reinterpretation of Spinoza, in and of itself, cannot rehabilitate theocracy (or any other nonsovereign regime) as an alternative to the dominant Jewish ideologies of the post–World War II era. Reading Spinoza cannot get us that far because, on the alternative Spinozist legacy that I have outlined, such arguments must be context-sensitive and historically informed. What the interpretation of Spinoza can provide, however, is a more capacious conceptual framework for the evaluation of Jewish political predicaments.

Current political exigencies demand that we develop this more capacious Spinozist legacy. At a moment when pundits speculate that the nation-state may constitute a brief chapter in Jewish political history, rather than the tradition's culmination, a framework that insulates sovereignty from critical scrutiny limits our ability to address pressing controversies. Scholars have long invoked Spinoza's authority, as the earliest and most incisive critic of theocracy, to buttress their endorsement of secular, state-centered Zionisms (Schwartz 2012; Weiler 1988, xiv, 96, 265, 276, 330–32).[17] Such invocations were arguably understandable through the 1980s and 1990s, when Israel's standing as a nation-state appeared secure, and the primary question for scholars of Jewish political thought was how to cultivate a pluralistic, liberal orientation. In this context, Spinoza provided a venerable "Jewish" source for secular, liberal nationalism. Yet scholars who assume this Spinozist mantle do not merely protest the authority of religious law within the State of Israel—they also enshrine the sovereign state as a vehicle for Jewish national liberation (see Walzer 2015). The conflation of theocracy with "antipolitics" risks disqualifying, in advance of the requisite debate, the emancipatory credentials of nonsovereign forms of Jewish politics, whether Zionist (e.g., Brit Shalom) or not (e.g., diaspora nationalism). At a moment when even centrist, establishment figures warn that Israel's days as a democratic nation-state are numbered, regnant interpretations of Spinoza's legacy are neither persuasive, exegetically, nor are they politically fruitful.[18] The demise of the Oslo process has inspired intense uncertainty surrounding the future contours of the Israeli regime—as well as a renegotiation of Israel/diaspora relations. Current controversies demand a resurgence of theoretical imagination regarding the regimes that can support Jewish political agency. Returning to the "source" and reclaiming Spinoza's legacy is a first step toward expanding the range of conceivable political positions.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that prevailing interpretations of Spinoza's legacy are both unpersuasive and unable to address contemporary political exigencies. Liberal, Hebraist, and Zionist interpretations cannot fully capture Spinoza's critique of theocracy, because they elide his ambivalent acknowledgment of the viability of nonsovereign polities. When accounting for the resilience of the Hebrew theocracy, Spinoza accords political standing to communities organized on principles other than absolute sovereignty, and he evaluates their strengths and weaknesses in political terms. Thus, the embrace of sovereignty as a precondition for agency is neither the only political conclusion that one can draw from

17. For a contrasting view of Spinoza as a proto-religious Zionist, see Novak (2015).

18. See Editorial Board (2016) and Friedman (2016).

Spinoza's critique of theocracy, nor is it the most compelling conclusion for scholars of Jewish politics. Such conclusions hamper our ability to confront the collapse of prevailing ideological configurations, because they prevent us from reopening questions about the relationship between divine sovereignty and human agency, between state sovereignty and national liberation. If theocracy does not entail the abdication of politics—if we do not yet understand what theocracy means or how it might find institutional expression—then the normalization of Jewish politics begin to look less urgent. Of greater urgency is a neo-Spinozist—context-sensitive, historically informed—investigation of the possibilities that sovereignty affords and the constraints that it places upon modern Jewish politics.

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