

SPINOZA ON STATE AND RELIGION,  
JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

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SPINOZA ON STATE  
& RELIGION, JUDAISM  
& CHRISTIANITY

Hermann Cohen

*Translated and with an Introduction by*  
Robert S. Schine

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## INTRODUCTION

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WHEN HERMANN COHEN arrived in Berlin in the autumn of 1912, the seventy-year-old professor of philosophy had just retired from his chair at the University of Marburg, where he had established what came to be known even in his lifetime as the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism. One of the very few Jews to hold a professorship in Germany—without forfeiting his faith at the baptismal font—Cohen had also become a cultural hero: From the prestigious perch of a university professorship he argued for the foundational role of the Jewish religion in the formation of the Western ideals of human dignity and social justice, and defended Judaism against the academic and intellectual elites who maligned it as an alien intrusion into the German nation. Though faced with anti-Jewish animus, Cohen held fast to his belief in a deep affinity—based on ideals—between the Jewish spirit and the German, a position that baffled both Judaism’s detractors, to whom such an affinity seemed a risible fantasy, and Cohen’s admirers, including his student Jakob Klatzkin, who conceded in a book he wrote as a philosophical eulogy to his teacher that Cohen’s position on Judaism and “Germanism” revealed the tragic streak in his life and thought.<sup>1</sup> And in a 1968 letter Gershom Scholem diagnosed Cohen’s belief in such a deep affinity as “totally fictive and unreal” from the start, a “utopian identification,” and an example of the great “lie” of German Judaism. His letter continued:

My father threw me out of the house in 1917 because I said: you and our family live in and through a lie. Cohen’s position was probably the most noble and compelling form that this lie could assume, in a man of true moral greatness, but it was still just a lie, and that (even if it did not necessarily have to lead to the genocide of the Jews, something none of us imagined) was bound to lead somewhere.<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere Scholem called Cohen the “unhappy lover” in the romance of the German-Jewish dialogue.<sup>3</sup>

So it is that reading Cohen demands a measure of historical sympathy, and a willingness to entertain his position and self-understanding as a German Jew. It requires philosophical sympathy, an inclination to accept, for the sake of a fair reading, the principles of the radical interpretation of Kant in the Marburg

school, which endured long after Cohen's death as a force in the interwar years of the "crisis" of German thought.<sup>4</sup> Neo-Kantianism also motivated Cohen to designate Spinoza as the modern father of philosophical pantheism. However, in his final years Cohen's antipathy toward Spinoza went far beyond an aversion to pantheism. Spinoza became, in his eyes, the archenemy of Judaism and "the real accuser of Judaism in the eyes of the Christian world."<sup>5</sup>

Cohen's arrival in Berlin to teach at the *Lehranstalt für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Institute for the Scientific Study of Judaism) was cause for celebration. During his first semester he offered a lecture course and a seminar on Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*. The annual report of the *Lehranstalt* conveys a sense of excitement: "The success of both the seminar and the lecture course matched their importance. The lecture hall of the *Lehranstalt* and the adjacent room could barely contain the size of the audience, which included people of all ages and social strata."<sup>6</sup>

One student who attended the seminar offers a more reserved assessment: the majority of the participants were unfamiliar with "Cohen's particular way of thinking or sensitivity." There was general consternation as it became evident that Cohen was using the seminar to gather material for a polemic against Spinoza. Furthermore, any gesture by those present to rally to Spinoza's defense was met with impassioned rebuttal. Cohen's monograph "Spinoza on State and Religion, Judaism and Christianity," published in 1915, is the product of that seminar held in Berlin in the winter of 1913. As noted by that student witness, historian Hans Liebeschütz, the monograph itself bears traces of its origins in a seminar room. One can almost hear Cohen speaking as he opens Spinoza's book, begins with the implications of the title, and proceeds to the text, "chapter by chapter."<sup>7</sup>

Cohen faults the title, *Theological-Political Treatise*, for omitting explicit mention of philosophy. He takes the book as a contrived and artificial combination of two discrete tractates addressing two topics that are connected not systematically, but only by the circumstances of Spinoza's life. The *Theological-Political Treatise* is, on the one hand, a *political* treatise in support of the liberalism of Spinoza's patron, Johan de Witt; and, on the other, it is a *theological* treatise in the sense that it is a critique of the Bible. It is intended to undermine the authority of the Bible, to demonstrate its human authorship—hence the significance of the book in the history of biblical criticism—and to show that it should in no way be considered of philosophical significance. According to Cohen, the first purpose can be attributed to Spinoza's close relationship to de Witt. The second purpose was to respond to his excommunication by the Jewish community of Amsterdam.

\* \* \*



Hermann Cohen was born in 1842 in the small town of Coswig (Anhalt), where his father, Gerson, served as cantor and teacher, two functions often shouldered by one person in the smaller Jewish communities of Germany.<sup>8</sup> Hermann Cohen's wife, Martha, later recalled that the elder Cohen was devoted to his son's Jewish education, giving him his first Hebrew lessons at the age of three and a half, and continuing unabated when Cohen left home to attend the Gymnasium (secondary school) in nearby Dessau. Gerson Cohen would visit every Sunday, spending the entire day studying Jewish texts with his son.<sup>9</sup> At the age of fifteen, Cohen made what seemed a natural transition to the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau, and, as required by the curriculum, also studied at the university in the city. Recalling his teachers on the occasion of the jubilee of the seminary in 1904, Cohen wrote that its founder and rector, Zecharias Frankel, envisioned a rabbinate guided by science and scholarship. The German term and notion *Wissenschaft*, for which "science" alone is an inadequate translation, denoted the ideal of systematic knowledge grounded in methodologically consistent inquiry. "Genuine piety," Cohen wrote, characterizing Frankel's commitment, will "always be vitally engaged in scientific scholarship [*Wissenschaft*]." In Frankel's vision, the "Jewish community of the future" would not languish in literalist resistance to the idea of historical development but would welcome *Wissenschaft* as its guide and embrace the seminary's scholar-rabbis as teachers.<sup>10</sup> Cohen's particular conception of history as a moral struggle toward an infinite ideal shimmers through his recollection of Frankel here. One scholar has even argued that Cohen's very idea of an all-encompassing system of culture is indebted to the kind of system of Jewish learning he encountered at the seminary under Frankel's leadership.<sup>11</sup> In Cohen's scientific approach, Judaism as it should be is Judaism guided by "ideas."

These inclinations led Cohen to abandon his intention of becoming a rabbi, and he left Breslau to study philosophy in Berlin. He finally earned his doctorate at the University of Halle. His first published book, *Kant's Theory of Experience* (1871), caught the attention of Friedrich Albert Lange, a controversial social reformer who became professor at the University of Marburg in 1872 and arranged for Cohen's appointment as a lecturer there the following year. Cohen later reports on a conversation with his sponsor that occurred not long after his arrival in Marburg. When Lange asked him, "Do our views diverge on Christianity?" Cohen responded, "No, for what you call Christianity, I call prophetic Judaism." In Cohen's retelling, their shared "ethical socialism" bridged any religious differences, reflecting the essential harmony between Christian and Jewish ideals.<sup>12</sup> After Lange's death in 1875, Cohen succeeded him, becoming the first Jew to occupy a chair in philosophy at a German university. Franz

Rosenzweig attributes the government's approval of Cohen's appointment to a spell of liberalism in the early 1870s, a consequence of Bismarck's confrontation with the Catholic Church during the *Kulturkampf*.<sup>13</sup>

In Marburg, Cohen continued his reinterpretation of Kant but soon developed his own "system of philosophy," following the sequence of Kant's critiques—first epistemology, then ethics and aesthetics: *Logic of Pure Knowledge* in 1902, *Ethics of Pure Will* in 1904, and *Aesthetics of Pure Feeling* in 1912. Cohen gathered around him the circle of students that became known as the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism. Among them were those who remained close philosophical collaborators, such as Paul Natorp (1854-1924), and those who later parted ways, such as Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945), who turned to the philosophy of culture, and Jakob Klatzkin (1882-1948), who lamented Cohen's principled rejection of Zionism.

By the end of the 1870s, however, a wave of anti-Jewish animus swept through the German academic and intellectual world. The battle was joined when Heinrich von Treitschke, then the editor of the prestigious and nationalistic *Preußische Jahrbücher* (*Prussian Annuals*), published his infamous article "Our Prospects" in 1879. He wrote of the "multitudes of assiduous trouser-selling youths from the inexhaustible cradle of Poland, whose children and grandchildren are to be the future rulers of Germany's stock exchanges and Germany's press." In this article he penned the phrase that the National Socialists would later appropriate: "The Jews are our misfortune."<sup>14</sup> Cohen joined his former Breslau teachers, Manuel Joël, Heinrich Graetz, and others, in rebutting the attacks of the historian, in what came to be known as the "Berlin Anti-Semitism Controversy." Treitschke refused to publish Cohen's response in the *Prussian Annuals*, but Cohen published it elsewhere, in 1880, as his "Confession on the Jewish Question."

The essay opens with a sigh: "So once again it has come to this: we must confess our faith and loyalty."<sup>15</sup> Confronted with the German nationalist extrusion of Jews from German culture, Cohen never wavers in his faith in a deep, essential equivalence between German and Jewish ideals. He was convinced, as he had intimated to Lange, that the nation of Luther and the nation of the prophets were guided by the same moral principles. He was thus able to write in his "Confession" that Protestant Christianity and Israelite monotheism, when examined with respect to their "scientific" (*wissenschaftlich*)—read: "idealized"—concepts of religion, are indistinguishable. His conviction may seem fantastic to us now. In fact, as I write these lines, the copy of Cohen's *Jewish Writings* belonging to the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem lies open before me. In the margin, a startled reader penciled in a long series of oversized question marks. As Emil Fackenheim remarked on the fiftieth anniversary of Cohen's death, "Such was

Cohen's trust in both these worlds, in their inherent affinity, that he had no inkling or premonition that disaster was imminent."<sup>16</sup> To Cohen, meanwhile, the defense of Judaism in the German forum of ideas was a matter of national Jewish honor: confronted by Treitschke's charge that the Jewish nation is an interloper, Cohen found himself in "the most awkward personal position." Treitschke claimed that, because Judaism is the national religion of an alien people, Jewish monotheism is incompatible with the "messianic-humanistic idea" of a pure Christianity.<sup>17</sup> Treitschke's diagnosis challenges the very legitimacy of Cohen's own identity. He understood that he had accepted "the official obligation to instruct the youth of the academy on questions that are hardly indifferent with respect to religion," to defend German philosophy and ethics, and therefore to demonstrate to the Protestants who had entrusted him, a Jew, with this office that he was worthy of the mission of the German university. At the same time, Cohen never failed to rise to the defense of Judaism in the public square. He was therefore exceedingly sensitive to the responsibilities of the Jewish public intellectual: not merely to refrain from criticism of Judaism that would give succor to its detractors, but actively to defend its honor.

Introducing his monograph "Religion and Ethics" in 1907, Cohen concedes that there is slight prospect, in an intellectual atmosphere so universally hostile to Judaism, of initiating a serious, dispassionate discussion on topics of Jewish significance.<sup>18</sup> Yet he refuses to resign himself to what he calls "quietism" and to limit his role to that of an educator for his coreligionists alone, despairing of the power of "science [*Wissenschaft*] and philosophy." Rising above the animus of public opinion, he argues for the "significance of Judaism" with unerring faith in the power of scientific inquiry.<sup>19</sup> He would not waver in his conviction concerning the harmony, *in essence*, of German and Jewish ideals, even as he confronted their dissonance *in reality*. Rosenzweig reports that Cohen discontinued his regular course on Schiller, reluctant to expose his love of the poet and of the German spirit to the disrespect of a student audience that had become openly anti-Semitic.<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, in the summer of 1912, with Cohen's retirement from Marburg imminent, a group of students marched to his home in a "torchlight parade"—a *Fackelzug*—the highest form of appreciation German students could render to an admired professor. With an air of melancholy, Cohen addressed the assembly at his door: by the "glow of torches... you bring me comfort for many a worry, many a care, many an old injury, comfort that I will take with me from my official post into the privacy of my study."<sup>21</sup> Thus the founder of Marburg neo-Kantianism took his leave of Marburg for Berlin, where he focused on the nature of religion—he published his book *The Concept of Religion in the System of Philosophy* in

1915—and set to work on a philosophy of Judaism, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*. He was reviewing the galleys of that book when he died in 1918; it was published the following year. But Cohen's first project in Berlin was his reading of the *Theological-Political Treatise*.

\* \* \*

The 1915 monograph was not Cohen's first statement on the *Theological-Political Treatise*. In 1910 he gave a lecture that was prompted, then as in 1915, by his objections to the Jewish veneration of Spinoza. The particular occasion was the naming of a new B'nai B'rith lodge in Berlin: "The Spinoza Lodge." In the 1910 lecture Cohen states that Spinoza's philosophical blasphemies fully justified his expulsion from the Jewish community.<sup>22</sup> But Cohen's efforts did little to slow the movement to reclaim Spinoza as a Jewish thinker and hero. Had Cohen lived longer, he would also have objected to the celebrations in 1927 of the 250th anniversary of Spinoza's death. At the ceremony at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, historian Joseph Klausner declared the writ of excommunication null and void, invoking the old formula of rehabilitation, with great pathos and without any rabbinic authority to do so: "Our brother you are, our brother you are, our brother you are!"<sup>23</sup> Many years later, David Ben-Gurion wrote a lengthy essay on Spinoza titled "Let Us Make the Crooked Straight" for the newspaper *Davar* to do his own part toward Spinoza's rehabilitation.<sup>24</sup>

To be sure, German Jews probably venerated Spinoza in part because the modern liberalism from which they benefited had its foundation in his political theory. As Leo Strauss would write years later, "Prior to Hitler's rise to power most German Jews believed that their problem had been solved in principle by liberalism: German Jews were Germans of the Jewish faith, i.e., they were no less German than the Germans of the Christian faith or of no faith."<sup>25</sup> But Cohen makes only passing mention of the contribution of the *Theological-Political Treatise* to the founding of modern liberalism.<sup>26</sup> Rosenzweig, in fact, took him to task for his blindness to Spinoza's role in creating the very political conditions under which Cohen himself lived and thought.<sup>27</sup> Cohen was too preoccupied with Spinoza's merciless critique of Judaism, which he saw as one of the two main purposes of the *Theological-Political Treatise*.

Cohen's critique thus stems from both his fidelity to Judaism and his neo-Kantianism. The latter predisposed him to loathe Spinoza as the father of modern philosophical pantheism. But fidelity to Judaism animated Cohen's specific charges against Spinoza: one, that he deliberately eclipses the rationalist philosophical tradition in Judaism; and two, that he denies the essence of Judaism: the idea of ethical monotheism. Furthermore, Spinoza suppresses the