



How Should a Jewish Philosopher Read the Bible? Hermann Cohen's Reinvocation of the Ban on Spinoza

Dr. Shira Billet

Shira Billet is assistant professor of Jewish Thought and Ethics. Before joining the faculty at JTS, she was a postdoctoral associate in Philosophy and Judaic Studies at Yale University, and she completed her doctorate at Princeton University in 2019.

Dr. Billet's research is focused on 19th-century and early 20th-century German Jewish philosophy, both in historical context and in relation to contemporary conversations in philosophical ethics. Her work considers the intellectual context in which modern Jewish philosophy was born—a context hostile to Jewish scholarship and Jewish philosophy—in relation to contemporary ethical questions about credibility (Who is believed?) and bearing witness (What kinds of testimony are believed?) within the political community and within academic scholarship. Her historical work also focuses on discussions of virtues and power in 19th-century Jewish philosophical conversations with respect to contemporary philosophical ethics about virtue and marginalization.

Dr. Billet's dissertation from Princeton University focused on the German Jewish Philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842–1918). Entitled "The Philosopher as Witness: Hermann Cohen's Philosophers and the Trials of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*," the dissertation offered an account of Hermann Cohen's understanding of the role of the (Jewish) philosopher within the political state. Cohen understood the role of the Jewish philosopher within the context of a longstanding strand he identified in the history of philosophy dating back to the trial of Socrates, namely the philosopher's role as "witness," in several senses of that word. The notion of the philosopher as witness is key to Cohen's understanding of the history of Jewish philosophy, including his reading of the biblical prophet Ezekiel, Philo of Alexandria, Maimonides, and Spinoza.

Dr. Billet's current book manuscript focuses on the virtues of courage, truthfulness, intellectual humility, and fidelity as public virtues—as virtues of citizens within the public square, and of individuals in relation to communities—within Hermann Cohen's work. In addition, she has several forthcoming articles on Hermann Cohen's work and on other aspects of modern Jewish thought and ethics. Dr. Billet has lectured and given papers at many institutions and academic conferences. Before coming to JTS, she taught courses in philosophy, Jewish thought, ethics, and theology at Fordham University, Princeton University, and Yale University.

I. The 19th C. Rehabilitation of Spinoza in Philosophy and Judaism

Yosef Klausner, “The Jewish Character of Spinoza’s Philosophy” (1927)

“To Spinoza the Jew, it is declared two-hundred-fifty years after his death, from the heights of Mount Scopus, from our Temple in miniature – the Hebrew University of Jerusalem: ... The ban is nullified! The sin of Judaism against you is removed and your offense against her atoned for! Our brother are you, our brother are you, our brother are you (*abinu ata*)!”

Samuel David Luzzatto, *Hamishtadel* (1847)

“This philosopher whose name was once a curse in the land, rose up in this generation in fame and glory and praise, so that his books, which were previously forbidden, have been... disseminated in this generation... and the name of the author is mentioned in commendation and blessing, so that in these times his accolades have also been written in the Holy Tongue [i.e., Hebrew].”

G.W.F Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*

“Spinoza constitutes such a crucial point for modern philosophy that we might say in effect that you have either Spinozism or no philosophy at all.”

II. Hermann Cohen’s Reinvocation of the Ban on Spinoza

Hermann Cohen, “Spinoza on State and Religion, Judaism and Christianity” (1915)

“...[W]hen Spinoza, with merciless severity, makes his own nation the object of contempt... no voice rises in protest against this *humanly incomprehensible* betrayal. No voice rises in protest when he disfigures the *one unique* God, the worship of whom forced him to flee Portugal and the Inquisition with his father.”

Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (chapter 3, “On the Vocation of the Hebrews)

“Their election... and their calling consisted only in the enduring prosperity of their state and in [other temporal] advantages. [...] So when it said in Scripture... that no nation has gods as close to it as the Jews have God, that must be understood only with respect to the state and only concerning that time in which so many miracles happened to them.”

“Now all that remains is to reply to certain arguments by which they want to persuade themselves that the choice of the Hebrews was not for a time, and in relation only to their state, but eternal. For they say: we see that after the loss of their state the Jews have survived for many years, although they were scattered everywhere and separated from all the nations. This has not happened to any other nation....”

“It’s true... that they have survived for many years, in spite of being scattered and without a state. But that is nothing to wonder at, after they separated themselves so from all the nations that they have drawn the hatred of all men against themselves.... Moreover... the hatred of the nations has done much to preserve them.”

Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (chapter 5, “Ceremonies and Historical Narratives”)

“... [C]eremonies – at least those treated in the Old Testament – were instituted only for the Hebrews, and were so adapted to their state that for the most part they could be performed only by the whole society, not by each person.

So it's certain that they do not pertain to the divine law, and make no contribution to blessedness and virtue, but concern only the election of the Hebrews – i.e., ... only the temporal happiness of the body and the peace of the state. For that reason, they could be useful only so long as their state lasted.”

Hermann Cohen, “Spinoza on State and Religion, Judaism and Christianity” (1915)

“Spinoza represents a grave impediment to modern Jewish history and therefore a great misfortune.... [E]ver since Lessig and Herder placed Spinoza on a pedestal, he and his *Tractatus* have become the authentic source of biblical and rabbinic Judaism in the modern world.”

“...[T]his book came to be regarded as the confession of a crown witness who, by virtue of his philosophical genius and expertise in the field of Judaism, possessed unassailable authority.”

“The pithy sayings Spinoza employed to vent his vengeful hatred of the Jews can be found even now, almost verbatim, in the newspapers of those [contemporary antisemitic] political camps”

“...[E]ven if Spinoza reviewed his own words in the most superficial way, he can have no doubt that the judgments he had drawn from Scripture and [Jewish] worship could do great and immediate harm to the Jews.”

III. Cohen’s Substantive Dispute with Spinoza: The proper method for reading the Bible as a Jewish text (or as a text that can tell us anything about Judaism)

Hermann Cohen, “Spinoza’s Relationship to Judaism” (1910)

“[Philology has] good value in relation to the meaning of words, but becomes folly when it remains the guiding principle for [understanding] the... content of the ideas (*Gedanken*) in a historical source.”

Hermann Cohen, “Spinoza on State and Religion, Judaism and Christianity” (1915)

“[Spinoza] may be able to shed light on the date and sequence of the books of the Bible. Those accomplishments are clear enough. But Bible criticism would be in a sorry state if it consisted only of philological analysis of this kind; if, for its *understanding* (*Verständnis*) of the Bible, and in particular for its understanding of the *Prophets*, were it actually based, intellectually, on Spinoza.”

Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (chapter 7, “On the Interpretation of Scripture”)

“[A]ll knowledge of Scripture must be sought only from Scripture itself”

“...the meaning of Scripture is established only from Scripture itself, and must be sought from Scripture itself alone...”

“[T]he universal rule in interpreting Scripture is to attribute nothing to Scripture as its teaching which we have not understood as clearly as possible from its history”

“...[W]e must depart from the literal meaning as little as possible.”

“[With regard to biblical expressions whose literal meaning contrasts with truths derived from reason] we must still retain that literal meaning, unless it is clearly opposed to the principles and foundations derived from the history of Scripture.”

Hermann Cohen, “Spinoza’s Relationship to Judaism”

“it seems downright impossible [to deny] any allegorical and symbolic understanding [in a book such as the Bible, where] prose is intertwined with poetry”

Hermann Cohen, “The Problem of Jewish Ethical Teaching” (1899)

“Judaism... forms ... [a] unity over many thousands of years of history. But, on account of this, the difficulty facing ethical teaching is severe to the point of insurmountable.”

Hermann Cohen, “On the Controversy between Trendelenburg and Fischer” (1871)

“Let the historian be a philosopher[!]”

IV. Philology, Philosophy, and the Common Human Being

Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (Chapter 7, “On the Interpretation of Scripture”)

“Maimonides’ method [of interpreting the Bible] is utterly useless [because it relies on philosophers and] takes away all the certainty the common people can have about the meaning of Scripture from a straightforward reading of it”

Hermann Cohen, “Spinoza on State and Religion, Judaism and Christianity”

“[In Spinoza’s biblical interpretation,] philosophy is... severed from philology... [A] barrier is erected between philosophy and ‘the natural capacity for thought that is universal among human beings,’ that is, in the vulgus.”

Jakob Freudenthal, *Spinoza’s Life* (1904) (quoted by Cohen in “Spinoza on State and Religion”)

“He judges the common folk of Holland with narrow-minded harshness... He criticizes the Jewish people with the same bitter narrow-mindedness...”

Hermann Cohen, “Spinoza on State and Religion, Judaism and Christianity”

“*Two* factors weigh against Spinoza: his contempt for the common *people* and his repugnant hatred for the *Jews*.”

V. On the Injustice of Failing to Recognize our Intellectual and Cultural Debts

Hermann Cohen, “Spinoza on State and Religion”

“Thus concludes the demolition of his inherited religion, the religion of his origins, and the religion from which he received his first religious knowledge and instruction and his first *ethical* impulses.”

Franz Rosenzweig, “Introduction” to “Hermann Cohen’s Unpublished Lecture on Spinoza”

“[There is an] injustice... in Cohen’s judgment of Spinoza... [I]t persists... in insufficiently reflecting on the conditions and foundations of the singular person. He would have needed to lead his assault with a stronger consciousness that – indeed not he himself, but – the time, in which he, Cohen himself, was born and raised, would not have been possible without Spinoza. But under the – admitted! – deep injustice of the Cohenian judgment lies its still even deeper justification... a justification [in our cognition cognition] of the book of books, Scripture.”