

Introduction

A Jewish Sovereignty?

Sovereignty has always been a contested issue among Jews. Tellingly, the prototypical features of this historical debate can be found in the Hebrew Bible, specifically in I Samuel 8. There, the popular demand for the institution of political, earthly sovereignty (in the form of centralized Israelite kingship), a demand driven by growing concerns over security, is countered by the prophet's theopolitics,¹ that renders political reality—including the earthly matters of security—a matter of Divine will, a derivative of obedience to God's laws, of His sovereignty.

The histories, traditions and laws of the Jews have maintained this tension between a sense of the inevitability of collective political agency, manifested in a form of sovereignty, and the just as inevitable sense of God's rule. Granted, this has mostly been a "theoretical" debate, as history—or God, if you will—positioned Jews as minorities among non-Jewish majorities. Nevertheless, the question remained: Should the Jews aspire—and actively strive—to gain sovereignty, or should they read their histories and traditions as bestowing them with a unique meta-historical role of ever being "diasporic" or "exilic," subjected, in the more immediate sense, to non-Jewish sovereignty, and, in the deeper sense, to God's sovereignty?

This exilic tradition, which has had the upper hand during most of rabbinical Judaism's history, famously relates the Talmudic story of the oaths adjured by God upon His people. The Jews are sworn to accept life in exile, and to obediently consent to a reality of living under foreign sovereignty.² Diaspora, in this regard, has been transformed from a spatial notion to a temporal and political one, denoting exactly the Jewish *lack* of sovereignty in "this world." The

absence of sovereignty has thus become a cornerstone of Jewish political thought.³

We must note that this does not mean that Jewish traditions—or Jewish life—were rendered apolitical. On the contrary, the same exilic, rabbinic tradition highlighted Jewish law as the foundation of Jewish identity. Law, which governs every aspect of the individual's and the community's life, *is* political. Moreover, paradigmatic codices of Jewish law, such as Maimonides's, for example, indisputably include also the "rules of the kings," which govern the political matters in the Jewish kingdom to come, once God redeems the Jews.

Nevertheless, if we view sovereignty as the constitution or dictation of law, and more importantly, the status of being above the law (through the ability to institute a "state of exemption,"⁴ where the law is postponed), then it may be safely said that diasporic Jewish traditions tended to prefer the absolute assignment of sovereignty to God. Everyone else—including the kings and their states—has been ideationally subjected to His law, His sovereignty. In more practical terms this meant the acceptance of foreign political sovereignty as an historical existential Jewish feature.

Political-Zionism, the triumphant Herzlian thread of Zionist ideology, rebelled against this exilic tradition. Its success has tipped the scales of the historical debate decidedly toward the side favoring Jewish political sovereignty.⁵ Significantly, Political-Zionism has won the debate using the conceptual framework and discourse of European modernity. Indeed, Zionism has celebrated itself as the modernization of the Jews, manifested in the dual revolution of allegedly secularizing Jewish identity and nationalizing, or politicizing it.

Zionism, then, introduced into the historical Jewish debate—or into the Jewish theopolitical traditions—a concept born out of a European, Christian, predominantly Protestant history and tradition: The modern European concept of the sovereign nation-state, that strives, beyond the state's monopoly over the use of violence and its status above the law, to create and preserve an absolute identification between sovereignty, territory, and identity. This "holy trinity" is served by the modernist discourse, which "subjects the concept of sovereignty to territory, war to international law, society to the sovereignty of the state, and civil rights to the national society."⁶

Zionist ideology was not the first to introduce the European-Protestant theopolitics of the sovereign nation-state into Jewish tradition; Moses Mendelssohn, who applied the category, or concept of

“religion” born out of the nation-state’s theopolitics to Judaism as a precursor to European-Jewish assimilation, preceded Zionism. But it was (Political-) Zionism, opposing the implications of Mendelssohn’s apolitical reading of Jewish tradition, which made Jewish sovereignty—embodied in the concept of the modern European nation-state—the core of Jewish peoplehood, the foundation of Judaism itself. Thus, in the Zionist view, the sovereignty of the nation-state—and not, for example, Jewish traditions, laws, and practices that have developed in exile—is that which should define Jewish nationhood itself (which, in turn, dictates the application of civil rights in the nation-state of Jews).

However—and this, I would argue, is key to understating the history of Zionism and the sociopolitics of the State of Israel—Zionism has embarked on this project of establishing Jewish sovereignty as the very meaning of Jewishness, or Jewish identity, has been fundamentally put in question. Most significantly, while Zionist ideology takes central role in the debate over the meaning of Jewishness, rebelling against the rabbinical understandings and meanings of this identity, it nevertheless neglected, or failed to, offer a viable positive, meaningful understanding (or “definition”) of Jewishness. In other words, Zionism’s rebellion against Jewish traditions that have historically constructed or defined Jewishness was not complemented by the construction or invention of a viable alternative meaning instilled in Jewish identity.

The Political-Zionist project thus won the upper hand in the historical debate over Jewish sovereignty, but it lacked a clear answer as to the meaning of this adjective. Indeed, Zionist ideology was uneasy with the very term, “Jewish,” which it identified with the malaise of exile. (Zionist ideologues preferred to use “Hebrew” as the adjective denoting their identity.) Zionism synonymized “Jewish” with a litany of negative traits, which were to be cured by sovereignty. Many have already noted the affinity—if not indebtedness—of this Zionist diagnosis, the “negation of the exile,” to prevalent European anti-Semitic stereotypes of “the Jew.” What sometimes goes unnoticed is the fact that the Zionist remedy, too, nourishes on a Christian (primarily Protestant) tradition; it understands sovereignty in historical-political Christian terms, and strives to apply it to Jews.

Zionist ideology and the sociopolitics of the State of Israel emanating from it, entail, then, somewhat of a paradox (in lack of a better term): First, propagating Jewish sovereignty, Zionist ideology would claim that it is this sovereignty—or, to be precise, its manifestation

in the political form of a Jewish nation-state—that defines Jewish (national) identity. But the very struggle to achieve this sovereignty—and especially a campaign to achieve sovereignty over a land inhabited mostly by non-Jews—has been conducted and justified in the name of Jewish nationhood. There must be, then, a prior distinction—one that precedes sovereignty—that defines Jewishness. Even in the narrowest of nationalist understandings of the meaning of Political-Zionism—that is, a view of the State of Israel *not* as a Jewish state but rather as “simply” a state of *Jews*, the question remains: what is a Jew?

Failing (or neglecting) to offer a fully-fledged national identity that would be independent from rabbinical readings of Jewish identity, yet zealously rebelling against rabbinical authority and “religion” in general, Zionism was left with a racial notion of Jewish identity: Tautologically, echoing anti-Semitic notions of Jewishness, it would argue that a Jew, simply, is a Jew; that Jewishness is something someone is born with. One does not choose it, nor can one rid oneself of his Jewishness; it is in one’s “blood.”

This tautology, a markedly mythic, analogical reason, which has dominated pre-state Zionist ideology and shaped much of the Zionist ideologues’ discussions on Jewish identity, proved insufficient in the framework of a nation-state that self-identifies as the state of Jews. The establishment of the sovereign nation-state of the Jews transformed the meaningful identification of what Jewishness is from a “cultural” matter to an existentially political one: it bore directly on the state’s survival as the nation-state of Jews. This was specifically true since the state, following the logic of mainstream Zionist ideology, viewed itself as secular; it could not explicitly rely on what it viewed as “religious” elements of Jewish identity for its own identification as Jewish. To give but one obvious yet controversial example, the alleged secularity of the state meant that it could not rely on the constitution of Jewish law, which secularism renders a matter of “religion,” as the law of the land to define its Jewishness.

The state chose not to (or maybe it was unable to, given its indebtedness to secularist epistemology and ideology) maintain a sovereignty that is *Jewish*, but rather to maintain the sovereignty of *Jews*. Indeed, as hinted to above, a dominant secularist-liberal reading has insisted that the secularity of the state means that it does not identify as Jewish at all (i.e., that the state does not carry a “religious” identity

of its own; that its sovereignty cannot be meaningfully Jewish); rather, it is “simply” a state of those identified as Jews.

This, of course, necessitates the clear, legalist identification of Jews, and their differentiation from non-Jews. That is, the state itself must play an active role in drawing a clear distinction between Jews and non-Jews—specifically Palestinian Arabs, of course—and to mark the former as those whose state it is, and to make them a majority, while designating the latter a minority, who in effect cannot claim full, equal participation in the sovereignty of the Jews (and in civil rights).

Most importantly, this definition of Israel as embodying the sovereignty of Jews demands that the state takes an active role in the construction, maintenance and preservation of its majority’s Jewishness. The state, in other words, needs sovereign Jews for it to obey its constitutive logic and exercise its sovereignty in their name. It thus devotes much attention and resources to the maintenance of those sovereign Jews—as *Jews*.

The aforementioned failure of the Zionist project and the State of Israel to construct and maintain a meaningful (that is, beyond the supposed biological trait of blood/race) non-rabbinical Jewish identity, meant that in practice, the state ended up relying on the (Orthodox) rabbinical establishment as the gatekeeper that would distinguish Jews from non-Jews. The state has also relied on the imposition of certain elements of Jewish traditions—which the secular logic itself marked as “religious”—for the maintenance of its majority’s Judaism. This is famously expressed in the “status quo” and the entailed “religious coercion”—that is, the (“secular”) state’s imposition of a (nationalist interpretation of-) some aspects of Jewish traditions that preceded the state on the public sphere as well as on its citizens’ private lives. This “religious coercion,” the dictation by the state’s (“secular”) law that certain (“religious”) practices are observed in public and private life, continuously draws the lines distinguishing Jews from non-Jews, maintain the former’s Jewishness, and reaffirm them as sovereign. In other words, it creates and maintains those sovereign Jews.

This reality of Zionist history and Israeli sociopolitics had been obscured by a predominant discourse of modernization and secularization. Zionist ideology, and the historiography and social sciences servicing it, have put the matter of Zionism’s unresolved relationship with its own Jewish, “religious” histories and traditions into supposed ease, by remaining loyal to the modern European discourse and

presenting Zionism as the secularization of Judaism. The notion that the Zionist project (in its mainstream manifestations, of course) and the ensuing State of Israel are, as dictated by the conceptual and categorical distinctions of the modern nation-state, secular, has thus been a cornerstone of the dominant discourse. Even when the apparent “deviations” from the secularist European model are acknowledged, and as the very meaning of this “secularity” is put in question, the fundamental misguided binary of “religion” vs. “the secular,” remains in place.



This book is an attempt to re-problematize the very notion of the sovereignty of Jews by critically assessing the ways in which Zionism and the State of Israel have negotiated with Jewish traditions that preceded them.

This framing of the discussion comes as a direct confrontation with an obsolete yet still-dominant secularist discourse on “religion and politics” in Israel. Indeed, even though it may be safely stated that—epistemologically, at the very least—we are in a post-secular(ist) phase of the study of humanity, many still tend to accept, whether implicitly or explicitly, some of secularism’s foundational binaries. Thus, while both organs of the most foundational binary of all—the secular-religion one—have been deconstructed, and critically put into the historical and political contexts from within which they arise as supposedly universal and transhistorical concepts, the discursive field abounds with references to the supposed complicated interaction of “religion and politics” (in Israel—and elsewhere, for that matter).

I argue that a central key to understanding the alleged convoluted relationship between “religion and politics” in Israel is the State of Israel’s interest in maintaining its sovereignty as the nation-state of Jews. This, as I noted above, creates a need to mark a majority of its population as Jews and to distinguish them from non-Jews. Coupled with the failure or neglect of Zionist ideology and the Israeli state to formulate a viable, positive alternative national identity (either “Hebrew” or “Israeli”), this leads the sovereign, supposedly secular state, to apply a narrow and problematic interpretation of Jewish “religion” as a central political tool for maintaining a Jewish majority and its sovereignty.

This book harnesses the powerful epistemological critique of the still-prevalent secular epistemology to drive forward a reconsideration and reinterpretation of the Zionist-Israeli case. I argue that the conventional discourse obscures our understanding of Israeli politics by forcing both public debate and academic interpretation into distorted and biased conceptual frameworks. Utilizing a discourse on tradition, I also offer an alternative framework for understanding what I prefer to identify *not* as an issue of the interplay between “religion and politics” in Israel, but rather as the obviously political issue of the ways in which the nation-state’s theopolitics negotiates with preceding Jewish traditions. Contrary to the secularist expectation, this relationship is far from being a resolved matter, as it fluctuates along a wide range of potential positions and attitudes—from indifference and negation, to assertive and conflictual reinterpretation, to explicit or implicit denial, to passive obedience, and even loyal dialoguing and observance.

The implications of this argument are not limited, of course, to the Zionist or Jewish-Israeli case. Indeed, in a certain sense this book, in the final analysis, is not about Israel, but about nationalism, political theology and the consequences of post-Westphalian sovereignty. Israel and Zionism—or the “Jewish problem,” which in some readings is the essential meaning of the European nation-state’s secularity—may indeed be seen as only the conduit through which this book establishes its argument.

This book thus highlights the distorting effect of the secularist (mis-)interpretation of sociopolitical reality in general. The secularist discourse is based on a foundational conceptual premise regarding an essential, categorical distinction between religion and politics. This involves matters of ontology, epistemology, and value-judgment. It assumes, as an essential preliminary consideration regarding the building blocks of human reality, that “politics” and “religion” are two ahistorical, universal (that is, culturally neutral), quasi-metaphysical realms (the historical manifestations of which are variations on the “ideal” concepts), which are mutually independent and distinguishable; It views and analyzes this reality inside a framework of understanding that emphasizes a list of binary distinctions (such as religion vs. secularism, modernity vs. tradition, and even the political vs. the non-political); And it conceives, or judges, the distinction between these two realms as proper—as a virtue that should be sought after

and fought over, being that which guarantees the healthy coexistence of the two dichotomous organs: politics, as a realm of rational decision making, and religion, as a realm of private spiritual experience.

Most critically, this framework assumes the modern, liberal, supposedly secular nation-state, on its interests and normative worldview as ahistorical and acultural, thus camouflaging the Western, Protestant, sovereign-nation-state-centered political theology that underlies this phenomenon as an allegedly objective assessment of human reality. And, crucially, it is this interested imagining of the sovereign state that gives birth to the very modern concept of “religion” as the realm of the apolitical and spiritual.

The Zionist-Israeli case offers a fascinating explication of the fallacy of secularism, specifically since it implicitly or explicitly “reads” the European, Protestant traditions of the nation-state into a non-European and non-Christian context. This reading necessitates the explication of those hidden roots of what otherwise presents itself as a universal narrative of human progress. This book offers, in other words, a narrative of the European Other’s attempt at adopting the European discourse of modernity, and the exposition of the hidden roots of this discourse that ensues.

A Traditionist Stance

The interpretive exercise I wish to make in this book might be better understood if identified as a critical Jewish reading of the Zionist idea and the Israeli nation-state project or, more accurately, of the interested, manipulative (and often denied) ways in which Zionism and the state have negotiated with the histories of communities of Jews, manifested as they are in Jewish traditions that preceded the Zionist project and its culmination in the State of Israel. If I am not mistaken in this identification of my own work here, then this “local” aspect of my discussion, that which deals with the Israeli-Zionist case study, is far from being a groundbreaking novelty. A critical, Jewish reading of the ways in which the Zionist nation-state copes with preceding Jewish traditions has already received ample articulation, coming either from anti-Zionist Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox circles,⁷ or from intellectual and academic circles, which nourish on diverging understandings of the meaning of Jewish traditions, and adopt a wide range of attitudes towards Zionism.

What new perspective, then, do I wish to present in this book? I believe the main difference between previous Jewish critical readings and the interpretation I present herein is the traditionist stance that guides my critical interpretation. This stance focuses on our understanding of tradition, and our attitude towards it. In previous works⁸ I described traditionism as a dialogical (yet surely not equal) stance in relation to tradition; an individual's or a community's loyal yet reflective—favorable and even sanctifying “in principle” yet interpretive, critical and selective in practice—attitude toward what they view as the tradition that constitutes their identity, that is: constitutes them as subjects. The traditionist stance is unique in its ability to stand outside of the binary structure of friend vs. enemy, upon which the dominant self-understanding of the West as secular, enlightened, and modern is constituted. It is thus further clarified by its independence from or critical appreciation of dominant Western epistemologies, conceptual frameworks, and narratives, which are usually headlined by the terms Secularism and Modernity.

As such, a traditionist stance can shed a unique light on various aspects of the dominant perception of reality, which are usually seen as self-evident and pass unexamined. Furthermore, a traditionist stance does so without necessarily adopting the Other's position, against which the dominant stance is shaped. A traditionist stance, in other words, can transcend the dichotomous binaries “religious vs. secular” and “modern vs. traditional,” and offer an insightful perspective on the dominant interpretative framework, which is constituted upon these binaries. At the same time, this critical view nourishes on an intimate familiarity with these dichotomies and binaries, as they shape the political space in which traditionism exists. Chapter 3, in which I will offer a more elaborate explication of the way in which the notion of tradition should be understood—a notion that lies at the foundation of my interpretation in this book—shall also offer a more elaborate presentation of my traditionist stance.

A Plurality of Judaism(s)

A clarification regarding my preference to use a plural form and speak of “Jewish traditions” and not simply of “Judaism” or a singular “Jewish tradition” would not be out of place here. Throughout this book I shall insist on highlighting the wide variety of forms of

life that are commonly tagged as “Judaism.” To put it simply, even if we could speak of a single constitutive meta-narrative of Jewish identity (this in itself is a questionable assertion), it is nevertheless a simple fact that history brought to life a rich variety of expressions, interpretations, and applications of this narrative. So much so that speaking of Judaism or Jewishness in the singular is misleading. The historical manifestations of “Judaism” or “Jewish tradition” are multifaceted, multi-vocal, varied and sometimes full of contradictions between competing interpretations and understandings of the essence of Judaism and its practical expressions.

This insistence on a plurality of “Judaisms” can rely on formidable precedents. Foremost among these is Jacob Neusner, who offers what another scholar describes as a “second order”⁹ definition of Judaism, or, more accurately, of *a* Judaism. A Judaism, according to Neusner, “is composed of three elements: a world view, a way of life, and a social group that, in the here and now, embodies the whole.”¹⁰ According to this definition, it may be the case that, at times, varying, competing versions or understandings of Judaism are manifested simultaneously; or, at other times, there may be just one, dominant version/understanding. Ignoring the history of this variety would be gravely mistaken: “we cannot hope to define a single Judaism that sets the standard for all competing versions”¹¹—simply because of the fact that a Judaism is dependent upon Jews to sustain it. Judaism does not have an “abstract” existence, one that is not rooted in the ways of lives of communities, who, by the very practice of their Judaism also constantly reinterpret and reconstruct it. José Faur, who offers a Sephardic-Jewish perspective for evaluating this argument, summarizes the implication of such an ethical understanding in a straightforward manner (quoting Neusner himself):

Since there are “many communities of Judaism, and they differ from one another,” we must speak of ‘Judaisms’—in the plural. With one caveat, “there is no such thing as ‘mine alone.’”¹²

Putting the emphasis on the notion of tradition, as I shall do in this book, immediately sheds light on this variety, and highlights our obligation to insist on a terminology and discourse that acknowledge this multiplicity, avoiding its coercion into a single, exclusive representation.

This is also the context in which one of the fundamental theoretical difficulties accompanying a discourse on Jewish politics comes to light. The “problem” with the Jewish histories, horizons of meaning, and traditions is that they do not fit easily, if they fit at all, into the commonly used categories, which originate in the modern Western discourse, such as nationalism, ethnicity, race, and religion. In many, meaningful senses “Judaism” is both and at the same time each of the above categories and neither of them. This is so since Jewish traditions offer full modes of living, touching upon various aspects, which are sometimes labeled by one of the abovementioned categories, and at times by another. They offer horizons of meaning, narratives, and behavioral codes that deal with the ways in which the individual and community are constructed, understand themselves, and cope with the surrounding world. And they are in a continuous, dynamic process of development.

Structure of the Book

The main features of this book’s arguments are discussed or revealed gradually: from the larger epistemological framework, through the Protestant history of religion, through Zionist ideology and to the sociology and politics of Israel. (A reader of an earlier draft suggested that the book offers the readers its argument in a Russian nesting doll structure). Sovereignty shall gradually emerge as carrying several meanings, which have to do with the state, the nation, society, civil rights, and more.

The book begins with an exposition of the theoretical, or epistemological foundation, of my argument. This is followed by an explication of my alternative analytical framework. The rest of the book deals with various issues that are often brought up into discussion under the heading of “religion and politics (or nationalism)” in Zionist ideology and the State of Israel, all of which touch upon, in one way or another, the ways in which the theopolitics of the Zionist project and the Israeli nation-state have negotiated with preceding Jewish traditions. This discussion involves aspects of the history of the Zionist idea, political arrangements in the State of Israel, and the Jewish identities of Israeli Jews. I both expose the shortcomings of the dominant discourse and explicate the ways in which the alternative interpretive framework I put forth illuminates these issues, and

through them sheds light on the larger political project of the Israeli nation-state. The book is thus divided into three parts:

Part I lays the epistemological and theoretical framework upon which my discussion is based.

Chapter 1 offers a detailed presentation of the argument regarding the necessity to overcome the use of “religion” as an ahistorical and universal concept. This chapter presents some of the major arguments developed in an extensive field of critical interpretations of the issue (this includes works by, among others, William Cavanaugh, Wilfred C. Smith, Talal Asad, Daniel Dubuisson, and Jonathan Z. Smith), highlighting the misuses of the term as transhistorical and transcultural.

Chapter 2 shifts the focus of discussion to the Jewish case, studying the ways in which “Judaism” was transformed into a “religion,” that is, the motives behind the reinterpretation (usually ascribed to Moses Mendelssohn) of Jewish traditions as corresponding to the modern meaning of the term “religion,” and the political implications of this modern reinterpretation.

Chapter 3 discusses the notion of tradition, and—based on a sociopolitical reading of philosophical works by, among others, H. G. Gadamer, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Charles Taylor—presents an understanding of the term that facilitates a better interpretation of the central issues discussed in the remainder of the book.

Part II is dedicated to a study of mainstream Zionist ideology’s attitude toward preceding Jewish traditions.

Chapter 4 asks whether it is correct to view Zionism, as students of this movement and ideology often do, as a project of secularizing Jewish identity. The chapter offers a critique of this dominant reading (as formulated, for example, by Shlomo Avineri, Gideon Shimoni, and Yosef Salmon), and a general interpretive framework to replace it.

Chapter 5 studies the ways in which key Zionist thinkers most prominently associated with “secular Judaism” (mainly Aḥad Ha’am and M. Y. Berdyczewski) handled the project of rewriting their relationships with their “religious” traditions.

Chapter 6 is dedicated to a similar study of dominant streams of Zionist thought and praxis (Socialist, Revisionist, and Religious) and their relation to preceding Jewish traditions. It focuses primarily on the thought of Naḥman Syrkin, Yitzhak El’Azari-Volcani, Y. H. Brenner, and Jacob Klatzkin, as well as on the historical project of the

Socialist Zionist invention of Jewish-national tradition in Palestine. A discussion on Revisionist Zionism and Religious Zionism concludes the chapter.

Part III studies Israeli sociopolitics, or, more accurately, the political culture and Jewish identity of the Israeli nation-state.

Chapter 7 examines the complicated nature of Israeli national identity's relation to its own Jewishness. It does so through an analysis of the Israeli Supreme Court's denial of the very viability of Israeli national identity.

Chapter 8 offers a reevaluation of Israelis' Jewish identities, focusing on the theopolitics of Jewish sovereignty. It does so through a study of A. B. Yehoshua's formulation of this theopolitics.

Chapter 9 continues this reevaluation by focusing on the political arrangements that enforce a certain interpretation of Jewish traditions on the public sphere, and even on the private lives of Israelis, namely the "status quo."

I shall begin, then, with a critical assessment of the attempt to view "Judaism" as "a religion."