

BEYOND THE CONTRACTIONS OF  
RELIGION AND NATIONALISM:  
ON THE ENDURING RELEVANCE OF  
HERMANN COHEN'S CRITICISM OF ZIONISM  
AND ITS UNHOLY ALLIANCE WITH ORTHODOXY

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I.

The rampant spread of Zionism can by no means be ascribed entirely to its forceful nationalistic effectiveness, for, by way of its politics of forming a strategic social coalition, it also profits from the Orthodox Jews' hostility towards liberalism. Orthodox Judaism, for its part, certainly does not spurn the gains reaped from such an unnatural coalition.<sup>1</sup>

The first reason why the coalition between Zionism and Orthodoxy, as diagnosed by Cohen in his short 1916 essay on the relationship between religion and Zionism, appears to be “unnatural” is that Zionism, in its essence, amounts to an anti-religious and certainly anti-Orthodox movement. At the time, the adherents of Orthodoxy for their part equally dismissed political

<sup>1</sup> Hermann Cohen, “Religion und Zionismus” [“Religion and Zionism”], in *Jüdische Schriften [Jewish Writings]* (Berlin: C.A. Schwetschke, 1924), 2:321 [English version by trans.]. The present essay takes this assertion, which, in view of the history of Zionism, certainly is astonishing, as the starting point for a reconstruction of Cohen's theopolitics, with special focus on its relevance for our own time. This is meant as a first attempt of construing Cohen's theopolitics as a dialectic of enlightenment based in messianism, a dialectics that in assuming the perspective of the Jewish community endeavors to reformulate the universal horizon of enlightenment.

Zionism in principle. The alliance is made possible, however, by the recognition of a mutual enemy, namely Reform Judaism, to which Cohen himself subscribes. With that in mind, let us take a moment to consider some more recent developments: Zionism has evolved significantly since the establishment of the State of Israel, and nationalism and religion have become increasingly intertwined, particularly over the last twenty years. This nationalist-religious<sup>2</sup> coalition has waged a broad culture war [*Kulturkampf*] against democratic and liberal legal culture and, in particular, against Israeli Reform Judaism. The continued exclusion of the latter from Israeli public religious discourse cannot be separated from the increase in tension between Israel and liberal American Judaism. Against this backdrop, Cohen's diagnosis is astonishingly relevant, however questionable his preferred alternative alliance—between Germanness (*Deutschtum*) and Judaism<sup>3</sup>—may initially seem from a post-Holocaust perspective.

Cohen's diagnosis is first of all a result of his specific conception of the ethical messianic nature of Jewish monotheism, which finds systematic expression in his late work *The Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism* of 1918.<sup>4</sup> As opposed to narrowly political or nationalist conceptions of the ethical dimension of monotheism—for which Cohen uses the term "myth"—the Jewish religion, with its emancipation of the Jews, aims at the universal

<sup>2</sup> [TN: While the original German has *national-religiös*, the English "national" may be too neutral a term to convey the more critical connotation that the German *national* appears to come with here.]

<sup>3</sup> Hermann Cohen, "Deutschtum und Judentum" ["Germanness and Judaism"] (1915), in *Jüdische Schriften [Jewish Writings]*, 2:237-301, and "Deutschtum und Judentum" (1916), *ibid.* 302-318

<sup>4</sup> Hermann Cohen, *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (Wiesbaden: Fourier, 1978 [1918]). In English as Hermann Cohen, *The Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (New York: Ungar, 1972).

Aside from this major work and the three volumes of his so-called *Jewish Writings*, it is above all in Hermann Cohen, *Der Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie [The Concept of Religion within the System of Philosophy]* (Giessen: A. Töpelmann, 1915) that Cohen lays out his Jewish philosophy and politics of religion. *The Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism* retroactively provides a complete theopolitical legitimation of the anti-Zionistic stance that already permeates Cohen's "Religion and Zionism" essay.

realization [*Verwirklichung*]<sup>5</sup> of humanity in freedom and justice. It is therefore in exile that Jewish monotheism necessarily comes into its own, ultimately transcending the entity of the nation state—in the form of socialism when viewed from a socio-interactional perspective, and in the form of a confederacy of states when viewed from the perspective of international politics. This is why, for Cohen, Zionism's striving for a sovereign Jewish state amounts to a catastrophic constriction<sup>6</sup> of ethical monotheism and, in view of the messianic dimension of the latter, to a clear regression as well.

If it is the case that, by means of this messianic theopolitics of exile, Cohen is able to uphold against Zionist contraction his preferred diasporic existence—the cultural-religious coalition of Judaism and Germanness—then the question arises whether, as a result of the catastrophic termination of this alliance in the Holocaust, Cohen's criticism of the Zionist contraction has lost some or all of its apparent present-day relevance. Yet it would be difficult to dispute, not least in the age of global nationalist-religious regression, that the model Cohen conceives for the messianic existence of transnational religious Judaism within non-Jewish nations and non-Jewish states gains new relevance.

The present paper (1) first summarizes the main points of Cohen's essay, then (2) unfolds his theology of exile in the spirit of the religion of reason as a dialectic of enlightenment,<sup>7</sup> with (3) the latter largely guiding his understanding of German-Jewish cultural affinities as well. This will be capped off (4) with a discussion of Cohen's theopolitics in the context of his debate with Martin Buber, who was critical of Cohen's stance. In a final section

<sup>5</sup> TN: Throughout his essay, Cohen uses a number of German terms that can be understood both in their (contemporaneous) every-day sense but also in the special sense they came to assume in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the wake of German Idealism. *Verwirklichung*, another translation for which is "actualization," is a quintessential Hegelian concept Cohen appears intent on somewhat transvaluing in a more Kantian vein.

<sup>6</sup> [TN: German words based on the verb *Kontraktieren* have been rendered using the English words derived from the verbs "constrict" and "contract" as appropriate for each individual context.]

<sup>7</sup> [TN: In some instances where "enlightenment" is used, some readers might prefer "the Enlightenment" (in the sense of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century historical movement rather than a more general method/way of thinking).]

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(5), the question will be raised of whether that debate might have been rooted in a misunderstanding of how close Cohen's dialogical theopolitics, as framed within German-Jewish culture beyond Jewish statehood, actually is to Buber's later anarchic binational dialogics between Jews and Arabs, which would find its theopolitical foundation in his *Kingdom of God*<sup>8</sup> of 1932.

## II.

It is true that even in his essay on Religion and Zionism Cohen depicts the German Jews' contemporary situation as one of constant alienness, exacerbated by rising antisemitism in the wake of the founding of the German empire in 1871 and the tensions between Protestants and Catholics. Yet Cohen does not yield to the temptation of instrumentalizing said antisemitism to negate German-Jewish culture in favor of Zionism. Indeed, given their shared aim of negating German-Jewish culture, antisemitism and Zionism were interdependent, these two political enemies forming a life-threatening coalition against their shared enemies, liberal culture and Liberal Judaism. Cohen is of the opinion that a German Jew who firmly holds on to his love of both German culture and the Jewish religion cannot but appear to either of his detractors as "a coward." Moreover, given his loyalty to the spirit of humanity, he also appears as a naïve epigon of an enlightenment already long stigmatized as insincere and untrue.

With this problematic coalition already established, Zionism enters a second unholy coalition with Orthodox Judaism, an alliance conditioned, just as before, on the existence of a shared liberal enemy. Whenever the antisemite and the Zionist question the German Jew's loyalty to his nation—either German or Jewish—the anti-religious Zionist and the anti-Zionist Orthodox Jew both invoke the national-collective nature of Jewish life, which has always been challenged and threatened by the liberal idea of individual autonomy and by a liberal Jewish existence rooted in freedom. The Orthodox-Halakhic order and the sovereign nation state find themselves endangered, both in

<sup>8</sup> In Martin Buber, *Das Königtum Gottes* [*The Kingdom of God*] (Berlin: Schocken, 1932/36). Idem., *Der Glaube der Propheten* [*The Prophets' Faith*] (Heidelberg: Lamber Schneider, 1984 [1942]), Buber elaborated on the idea of theopolitics once more, making reference to Isaiah's prophetic theopolitics.

principle and in actuality, by these liberal conceptions. They thus join forces against liberalism with more than just strategic considerations in mind.

Employing the concept of "nationality" [*Nationalität*], which he places alongside and at the same time subsumes under the concepts of "state" and "nation," Cohen attempts to develop a strategy running counter to the idea of a Zionist state, one that does justice to a universal Jewish religion of reason beyond Orthodox metapolitics and Zionist politics.<sup>9</sup> In fact, he presupposes that whenever moments of political crisis flare up, the religion of reason must stand its ground historically and politically, being thus forced to define—by way of what one might call a "determinate negation" [*bestimmte Negation*]<sup>10</sup>—its universal mission each time anew. This imperative just happens to obtain as well at the time of Cohen's writing his essay; at a moment, that is, when the task is to salvage the original prophetic mission of the religion of reason in the face of the strategic political coalitions entered into by Zionism.

The notion of "nationality" designates, first of all, the Jewish community in its ethno-religious grounding. This community, however, has always defined itself on the basis of monotheistic religion, thereby maintaining within its very self the tension between a particular national existence and a messianically universal horizon—the idea of humanity [*Menschheit*]<sup>11</sup>—throughout all its politico-historical metamorphoses. The Jewish people was constituted as such after the destruction of the Jewish state in 70 A.D. and, ever since, it has done more than merely exist within the frame of non-Jewish polities or nation states. In the context of diasporic life in different states, it has

<sup>9</sup> "The state unites nationalities, not nations. It is but the state which founds [*stiftet*] and grounds [*begründet*] that single nation with which it equates. But this single nation, defined by the state, is able to unite a multitude of nationalities within itself" ("Religion and Zionism", 323) Cf. *Religion of Reason*, 448: After elucidating the interconnectedness of state, nation, and nationality in its historical context, he immediately goes on to address Zionism: "If we now return to the Jewish problem, then we recognize the backwardness of Zionism with regard to the concept of nation. If the isolation of the Jewish community remains necessary, then isolation in a separate state would be in contradiction to the messianic task of the Jews. Consequently, a Jewish nation is in contradiction to the messianic ideal."

<sup>10</sup> [TN: Another classic Hegelian term.]

<sup>11</sup> [TN: "Humanity," rather than the more literal "mankind," may better capture the spiritual quality evoked by Cohen in this passage.]

preserved within itself the tension obtaining between its own particularity and its supranational relation to the ethico-religious idea of monotheism.

For Cohen, the realization of the idea of humanity must occur, as a factual reality, within the state, which means that Jewish nationality, too, was historically constituted within the state. But the state as such is always not only the realization but also the limitation of this same idea. Insofar as the state tends to place at a disadvantage or even exclude the non-citizens and the economically weak, the principle of critique and extension must be employed. Cohen establishes this as the essence of Jewish monotheism and, by that token, as the ethical mission of the Jewish nationality, as well.

Given its religious mission [*Auftrag*], it is impossible for the Jewish nationality to fully come into its own in a Jewish state unless it declines its task of constituting a community by way of religious legitimation. As a diasporically scattered nation in exile, this community serves as both a sign and a model of the universal realization of the One Humanity. Cohen considered the inauguration of this One Humanity by the socialist movement and the establishment of the confederacy of states Cohen to be imminent.

Since isolation in a nation is, thus, not permissible and Judaism needs isolation in the law, the latter task might become illusory if the notion of the nation were not replaced by the notion of nationality. Insofar as isolation in a nationality is necessary, it is in no way hopeless, for its realization is possible without a state of one's own, and even within the individual states and cultures of other peoples. This is even demanded by the idea of the state for its own sake as well as for the sake of the confederation of states.<sup>12</sup>

However, if Judaism wished to require isolation in law, the nation being inadmissible would not render it an illusory task, since nationality would serve in lieu of the nation. If this isolation is necessary, it is by no means impossible, for it can be achieved without one's own state and within the states of others. Thus, it requires the concept of a state for its own sake as well as for a federation of states.

As regards the current historical situation of the Jewish people in exile, this means that the Jewish nationality, along with other nationalities, needs to integrate, as a loyal community entitled to equal rights, into an already

<sup>12</sup> *Religion of Reason*, 421.

existing nation state—such as Germany, France, or the United States of America. "It is but the state which founds [*stiftet*] and grounds [*begründet*] that single nation with which it equates. But this single nation, defined by the state, is able to unite a multitude of nationalities within itself."<sup>13</sup>

To counter the well-known accusation, routinely leveled by Christians, that the Jewish religion has its foundation in the idea of ethnically-restricted love of neighbor [*Nächstenliebe*], and thus in a nationally-particular theocracy, Cohen (re)constructs the biblical and Talmudic sources of Jewish monotheism, in the spirit of a universal ethics of neighborly love [*Nächstenliebe*]. In reference to those Mosaic commandments concerning the rights of outsiders and the disenfranchised—that is, in the specific Mosaic sense, of the widow, the orphan and the foreigner—Cohen demonstrates how the Mosaic law, at least in principle, has always already tended to transcend—in fact, could not but transcend—the boundaries and barriers imposed by the ethnopolitics of the nation states and sovereign autarchy. This tendency concretizes itself in the form of the Self's compassion for the Other as an outsider, which is indeed the precondition for the Self's coming into being as an ethical-dialogical fellow human being and neighbor through an Ego-Alter or I-Thou [*Ich-Du*] relationship.<sup>14</sup> For Cohen, the historical crisis of the Jewish state and its transformation into a community and nationality defined by religion and halakhah—a community organized around the synagogue<sup>15</sup>—after the destruction of the temple captures the essence of monotheistic ethics, thus constituting a historical necessity from this perspective. This crisis was necessary to open up the prophetic-messianic horizon of universal dialogue with the Other that is encoded in monotheism, and thereby also the horizon of world history. In light of this, the Jewish nationality and exile not only become theopolitically legitimated but also serve to justify, in the sense of a

<sup>13</sup> "Religion und Zionismus," 323 [English by trans.]

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Religion of Reason*, ch. 8, "The Discovery of Man as Fellowman" and ch. 9, "The Problem of Religious Love."

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Religion of Reason*, 282: "The state had been destroyed, and its reestablishment could not and was not permitted as long as Persian supremacy had to be respected. [...] We shall see later how monotheism only fulfilled itself by breaking away from the particular state." And see also *ibid.*, 197: "Thus the congregation originated as the unity exclusively suited to the unique task of religion."

theodicy, the suffering they endured in exile by creating hope for the coming of a messianic age.

Therefore, despite being a necessary transitional stage in the course of humanity's realization, the sovereign state also expresses the tendency inherent in political mythology to empower itself as a nation, closing itself off from other nations and nationalities. Cohen considers this sort of political mythology to be especially characteristic of pantheism and polytheism. Monotheism, in contrast, founds the transnational and transpolitical idea of One Humanity, whose avant-garde is to religiously represent and drive forward the Jewish community under the banner of its loyalty to a non-Jewish state.

The myth celebrates power in gods as well as in heroes. Religion cannot be the worship of power. In the myth, only the heroes are 'loved by God' [...]. The new concept of God, however, demands justice and love for all men.<sup>16</sup>

This is unmistakably an implicit criticism of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, which anticipates the realization of God in the sovereign state, thereby relegating to the past the stateless Jewish people and its religion, a configuration of the world spirit [*Weltgeist*] that has been long overcome. For Cohen, Hegel's philosophy becomes the archetype of pantheistic myth, employing post-Kantian transcendental philosophy to bring Spinozist metaphysics—with its identity of God and nature—to its politico-theological completion in service of the modern sovereign state—that is, the identity of theology and politics.<sup>17</sup> In so doing, Cohen is evidently in line with Rabbi Nachman Krochmal's criticizing—from a perspective that emphasizes the

<sup>16</sup> *Religion of Reason*, 332.

<sup>17</sup> Hermann Cohen, "Spinoza über Staat und Religion, Judentum und Christentum" (1915) ["Spinoza on the State, Religion, Judaism, and Christianity"], in *Jüdische Schriften [Jewish Writings]*, vol. 3 (Berlin: C.A. Schwetschke, 1924). Here, Cohen fleshes out myth in its character as a pantheistic ontotheology, which necessarily can only end up becoming a political theology of the sovereign state. The identity of God=nature becomes that of God and the state. It was a student of Cohen's, Jacob Klatzkin, who not only was the first to provide an overview of Cohen's philosophy (of religion) but also formulated the first comprehensive critique of his theopolitics. A Zionist, he moreover translated Spinoza's ethics into Hebrew in 1923. Jacob Klatzkin, *Hermann Cohen* (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1919).



continuous existence of the Jewish people—Hegel's construction of the history of spirit.<sup>18</sup> It is precisely the Jewish people's statelessness that turns it into both the subject and witness of the messianic world spirit's yet-to-be-completed mission; its determinate negation of state, myth, and ethnos make it the subject of the dialectic of enlightenment and unfinished modernity.

Against the Orthodox retreat from history into a halachically and liturgically isolated, closed-off meta-history and against the Zionist return to the history of sovereign nation-statehood, Cohen deploys the concept of the Jewish nationality beyond both state and nation, thereby constructing the prophetic-messianic horizon of Jewish monotheism as the substrate of a universal history of mankind.

The Jewish community's genesis out of the Jewish state therefore forms the precondition for constructing this community on the basis of the synagogue-anchored nationality which simultaneously integrates into the modern nation state. If it is true that Jewish nationality is, accordingly, a sign and a symptom of the unfinished project of modernity—and thus the real and present subject not only of the critique of political mythology but also of the messianic hope to overcome all mythologies and national-sovereign political theologies and pathologies—then Cohen cannot but dismiss Zionism on the grounds of its being a political mythology and, in fact, a radical betrayal of true monotheism. From this follows that Cohen must oppose the secularization and profanation of the Hebrew language, the essence of which he seeks to preserve in its ethico-religious sacredness, thus reserving it for the Jewish nationality's ethico-religious liturgy.

Indeed, proceeding from the concept of "guilt," Cohen's ethical messianism envisions, similarly to Kant's *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, a radical deepening of the idea of autonomy, the full yield of which is found in the idea of reconciliation as it appears in the liturgy of Yom Kippur.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Nachman Krochmal, *Führer der Verwirrten der Zeit* [*The Guide for the Perplexed of Our Generation*], ed. Leopold Zunz (Berlin, 1851).

<sup>19</sup> Clearly, chapters 11 and 12 of *Religion of Reason* relate in many ways to the first chapter of Kant's *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. However, Cohen transposes the problem of guilt from its Paulinian context back to the prophecy of Ezekiel, developing in specific reference to Yom Kippur the subject of 'guilt' and "personal responsibility" against the horizon of community and cult.

Referring to the example of the prophet Ezekiel, Cohen conducts a logical reduction of the idea of freedom to the individual that takes responsibility for and is reconciled with itself. In so doing, Cohen not only accomplishes a religious re-foundation of ethics, but he also succeeds in establishing anew the ethical foundation of Jewish liturgy, that is, of religious legislation in the sense of the halakhah and the community as such, which is constituted by religious law. In this way, the dialogical ethics of the Other is ultimately not only anchored and legitimated by an ethics of personal responsibility, but it also becomes, in the shape of the idea of the community, the model of any ideal communication between human beings.

It is no coincidence that "Sh'ma Israel," the liturgical call to unity pledged in the holy language, becomes the true core of the religious-ethical existence of Jewish nationality. The affirmation of God's unity as an affirmation of the unity of humankind is thus liturgically pledged in the community's prayer, a prayer by which Cohen seeks to prevent the profaning of the Hebrew language.<sup>20</sup>

### III.

In its most basic sense, Cohen's criticism of [*Kritik am*] Zionism thus complements his criticism of the modern Hegelian philosophy of the state, that is, of the conception that in the process of the world spirit attaining consciousness of itself, God manifests Himself necessarily and progressively in nature and history, ultimately reaching complete dialectical unfolding as the fulfillment of the idea of freedom in the nation-state. In opposition to the metaphysical identity of God with Being, which is enshrined in the identity of theology and politics, Cohen emphasizes the absolute unity and uniqueness

<sup>20</sup> This debate between Cohen and Buber can with good reasons be considered the prelude to the debate between Franz Rosenzweig and Jacob Klatzkin. In the 1925 essay "Neuhebräisch" [Modern Hebrew], in *Kleinere Schriften* [Misc. Writings] (Berlin: Schocken, 1937), 220–228, Rosenzweig had attacked what he deemed to be Klatzkin's profanation of the Hebrew language in his translation of Spinoza, an attack to which Gerschom Scholem's famous letter in critique of secularization makes reference as well. Scholem's letter was first printed in Stephane Moses, "Sprache und Säkularisation" ["Language and Secularization"], in *Der Engel der Geschichte* [The Angel of History] (Frankfurt Am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1994), 215–217.

of God beyond nature and sensuality. Based on this concept of God, he thus opens up the horizon for a universal ethics freed from nature, which cannot rise up to the political totality of the state. This conception of monotheism indeed mirrors his particular conception of a theologically-founded dialectic of enlightenment that seeks to shield the universal horizon of freedom from any political or economic contraction, and thus from that which Cohen calls "myth." Cohen conceives of this politico-theological myth in two ways: ontologically, as a pantheistic totality of idea and nature, and politically, as the instrumentalization of the idea by naturalist interest. He accordingly contrasts it with Jewish monotheism, which Cohen considers the foundation of and precondition for the pure ethical ideas of humanity and enlightenment. This idea of enlightenment in the tradition of Kant is based on the principal identity of monotheism and ethics, thus being both theologically relevant and politically determinative. This idea is tasked with delineating the horizon of the kind of critical politics that considers the one's organization within the boundaries of a state not as the inevitable completion and fulfillment of the idea but rather as the precondition for universally realizing ethical socialism in a configuration that transcends the national state.

Cohen's philosophy of religion sees itself consistently as a critical recapitulation, from a dual perspective, of the history of enlightenment along the horizon of the idea that underlies it: (1) where the Enlightenment birthed the abstract idea of humanity from a pure ethics of autonomy, it necessitated an insight into the necessity of its own political concretization, which Hegel saw as completed in the bourgeois<sup>21</sup> state.<sup>22</sup> However, together with this bourgeois nation state, that specific contraction which was to spark Marx's critique of the ideology of civil society was brought about as well (2), namely, that the universal horizon of humankind was replaced by the bourgeois class,

<sup>21</sup> [TN: The German adjective *bürgerlich* hovers between "bourgeois" and "civil."]

<sup>22</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbeth, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). "One should expect nothing from the state except what is an expression of rationality. The state is the world which the spirit has created for itself; it therefore follows a determinate course which has being in and for itself. [...] We should therefore venerate the state as an earthly divinity and realize that, if it is difficult to comprehend nature, it is an infinitely more arduous task to understand the state" (§272, p. 307).

leading to the exclusion of the poor and impoverished proletariat. Similarly, however, Leopold Zunz and Abraham Geiger, the trailblazing fighters for Jewish emancipation, necessarily realized early on that the same civil society established in the name of freedom and equality also exhibited a tendency of revoking the rights of the Jews. Viewed from this perspective, paupers and foreigners became the outsiders whom enlightenment excludes, and in reference to whom its dialectics must be critically rethought down to its basic principles. Only thus can it be prevented from undergoing its own immanent nationalist and economic contractions (3).

Here, Cohen's neo-Kantianism gains its specific theopolitical legitimation: In view of this dialectic of enlightenment, the Kantian synthesis of monotheism and universalist ethics must not only be (re)set—in opposition to both Hegel's and Marx's deterministic systems theories—on its idealistic foundation but also reconstructed in reference to those same social, existential, and political outsiders—that is, as a socialism based on Kantian ethics and Jewish prophecy.

*The Religion of Reason* reconstructs this dialectic, as it were, by taking recourse in the pre-history of man as reported in the narratives of Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses. In these narratives, the history of humankind is always already the precondition of the Jewish people's history, the paradigmatic sediments of which can be found in the legislation of Moses—a Jewish theocracy whose legislation has always been tasked with including the outsider, embodied by the poor man and by the foreigner—the economic and national Others. In the Mosaic laws' manifold specifications concerning "widow, orphan, and foreigner," Cohen recognizes two things: First, the ethical condition of the possibility of the dialogical constitution of the Self in exchange with the Other as its Neighbor [*Nächster*], and second, the opening up of the messianic horizon of the universal realization of the idea of humankind beyond state and nation. If this dialogical self-constitution is accomplished by way of compassionately sharing in the outsider's suffering, this compassion opens up the boundaries of ethnos and nomos as circumscribed by the national state, symbolically pointing to that which transcends all national boundaries: the horizon of the messianic realization of the unity of humankind as the correlate of the absolute unity of God. This conception of a radical messianic universalization of Mosaic legislation is

realized by the prophetic ethics, that of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and above all Ezekiel, who through the idea of reconciliation not only individualizes and liturgizes this ethics but thereby also bestows on the destruction of Jewish statehood the status of both an historic-providential event and an eschatological symbol: The Jewish religion cannot and must not—thus Cohen's train of thought—wish to realize itself in a Jewish state, for such a realization would mean nothing less than the betrayal and abandonment of its monotheistic mission vis-à-vis mankind as such.

To Judaism and Jewish nationalism—which always already presupposes, in a practical-ethical sense, the idea of mankind united—there thus accrues a special role in the political history of mankind, particularly regarding modernity's history of enlightenment and its specific dialectic: In this history, Jewish nationality, as a provisional national and religious outsider, assumes the role of the collective Other, of the pauper and the foreigner. It thus becomes a symbol of foreignness and life in exile, representing the unfinished project of enlightenment and the yet-to-be-realized idea of humanity in the face of the latter's national, political, and economic restrictions and contractions. Jewish nationality is a metonymy of the subject that is the outsider, thus being indispensable for the universal history of freedom. In its specific nationality, it is the actual and real subject of its dialectic—hitherto as the subject-receiver of suffering under it but also, prospectively, as the subject-agent of hope for its messianic realization.

This historical suffering of Israel gives it its historical dignity, its tragic mission, which represents its share in the divine education of mankind. What other solution is there for the discrepancy between Israel's historical mission and its historical fate? There is no other solution but the one which the following consideration offers: to suffer for the dissemination of monotheism, as the Jews do, is not a sorrowful fate; the suffering is, rather, its tragic calling, for it proves the heartfelt desire for the conversion of the other peoples, which the faithful people feels.<sup>23</sup>

In this view, Zionism once again appears as the absolute antithesis to Cohen's theopolitics of enlightenment, as the revocation and betrayal of the Jewish nationality's prophetic task. Not only that; for Cohen, Zionism thereby

<sup>23</sup> *Religion of Reason*, 284.

also reveals its inherent eudaimonistic ethics, thus displaying the kind of pantheistic and naturalistic tendencies of modern Spinozist thought. This thought, in its adoptions by Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, originates in the idea of man's being happily fulfilled by his own self-empowerment, as well as that of the power that accrues to the sovereign state from the idea of a *philautie*, or self-love, rooted in nature. That is, the subject's self-foundation on the basis of the laws of nature—as a sovereign power and sovereign self-interest – necessarily restricts the horizon of the pure idea of mankind and, in the last instance, resolutely excludes the Other qua Other. Consequently, the excluded Other once more becomes the symptom of the world of political and pantheistic mythologies, in this case, of Zionism.

It is in this spirit that Cohen quotes from Herzl's utopian novel *Altneuland* [*The Old New Land*], whose protagonist, Litwak, explains to his German friend and helper that all he wants is to be happy—unlike the Jews in the Ghettos. "Those lads [*Kerls*] just want to be happy", Cohen remarked in sarcastic disdain regarding the Zionists,<sup>24</sup> thereby also putting his finger on the eudaimonistic and pantheistic core of its political theology of the sovereign Jewish subject. For its unholy coalition with both German-nationalist antisemitism and Jewish Orthodoxy, Cohen identifies this subject as the declared enemy of liberal Reform Judaism in his essay on religion and Zionism.

#### IV.

Even as Cohen dismisses Zionism, he champions Jewish nationality—as a driving force of ethical monotheism—within non-Jewish nation states, specifically the German *Kulturnation*. However, by taking this stance he does not simply replace Zionism with another patriotism—a German-nationalist one—but instead proceeds along the lines of his own conception of this dialectic of enlightenment. The rhetoric of patriotism and the nation figures as the other explicit display of the politico-theological understanding of German-Jewish affinity, an affinity of Protestantism and Judaism regarding the ethico-

<sup>24</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, "Vorwort" ["Preface"], in Hermann Cohen, *Jüdische Schriften* [*Jewish Writings*] (Berlin: C.A. Schwetschke, 1924), 1:LX: "Let me tell you something,' then muffling his voice to a thunderous whisper: 'Those lads want to be happy.'" [Engl. by trans.]

prophetic essence of both nations, which by way of the complete emancipation of the Jews is to realize itself as an extension and prolongation of German and European history.

In other words, the idea of German-Jewish culture assumes a special role in the history of mankind and the metamorphoses of its political state formations insofar as both—German culture and Jewish culture—find themselves at the very least united in the theologically-grounded ethical idea of enlightenment, whereby they rise to the rank of an avantgarde of the spiritual-messianic guidance of mankind. Within the German nation state, Jewish nationality takes on the complex role of being a minority- and outsider-nation while at the same time acting, by way of its prophetic ethics, as parental nation and parental religion to the German-Lutheran culture of ethical life [*Sittlichkeit*].

Philo's Greek translation of Judaism, as the fount of Christianity, helped mold the German nation which, through the stages of Catholicism and Protestantism, developed the Christian religion into the ethico-religious culture we find expressed in Leibniz, Kant, and Fichte. So too, it was only within the boundaries of this nascent idea of culture that Judaism itself was able to come (back) into its own being and origin, into pure monotheism and the prophetic ethics, fully unfolding them in its exchange with German culture and in opposition to the traditional metapolitical forms of existence of communal Jewish life in the diaspora. In this view, what we are dealing with here is a kind of dual, reciprocal process of assimilation: Just as German Protestantism unfolds into ethical idealism, Judaism retrieves its original prophetic mission by way of this idealism.

For Cohen, names such as Moses Mendelssohn, Leopold Zunz, Abraham Geiger, Louis Levandovski, and Ferdinand Lasalle stand in as representatives for this transformation of Judaism from a meta-historical community in exile to a messianic nationality. This nationality is to put into practice within the boundaries of the German nation state, not least by way of reaching full Jewish emancipation, the idea of humanity in the sense of international socialism, and the confederation of states.

Here, Cohen essentially presupposes not only an assimilation of Jewish culture to German culture, but, at the same time, a process of mutual assimilation through the stages of Christianity, Protestantism, and idealism

between German spirit and Jewish monotheism, by virtue of which both the emancipation of the disadvantaged Jewish nationality and the idea of universal humanity are no longer hampered. At the same time, the historical process that has been set in motion by German-Protestant enlightenment and its complex dialectic makes possible the cultural-political (self-)correction of the Jewish tradition by means of Reform theology, whereby the shared and as it were binational project of messianic politics is to be realized in the very near future, with the dialectic of enlightenment approaching its eschatological goal!

Cohen considers the affinity between the Jewish and German nations to ultimately lie in their each being able to transcend their respective national self-consciousness in favor of the idea of humanity. While this transcendence has historically been the very law of existence of the Jewish nationality, Cohen extrapolates from German idealist philosophy—which he takes to be the essential constitution of the idea of German culture—an analogous cultural tendency, namely, to subordinate the idea of the German nation to that of humanity. Socialism and the confederation of states are the two philosophical consequences of this idea of culture, forming the utopian horizon of its legitimation.

The world-historical constellation determining Cohen's thought is an ironic one: at the same time that the German nation, with all its pathological nationalist-religious reductions, appears to move towards the realization of socialism and the idea of European statehood, the Jewish nation is in danger of breaking away from this binational utopia by renouncing it in the name of Zionism, its own nationalist-religious movement. At the time of World War I, Cohen's only course of action lies in attempting to essentially conjure up an affinity between Germanism and Judaism, thus sounding a final call that might drown out the dissonant friction of that project—a call, that is, to their inherent potential and disposition to ethically transcend their respective nationhoods. Of the German nation, Cohen writes:

Should this war have succeeded in dispelling the last remaining shadows that have obscured the inner German unity, then, overcoming all religious and ethnic circumscriptions, the cosmopolitan spirit of German humanity will become the recognized truth of world history on the basis of its German



nationality, its special German approach to science, and its ethics and religion.<sup>25</sup>

As regards the Jewish nation, Cohen summarizes this train of thought as follows:

If we grant that the Jews should hold on to their tribal unity, there cannot be any doubt nonetheless that the only reason for conceding this lies in its being the natural means to preserve the purity of faith. Yet if, beyond that, the pinnacle of religion is the messianic future in which the one sole God will be worshiped by all of mankind, which will be united in Him, then this basic principle – by which old Judaism rejuvenates itself in and as modern Judaism – must not be muddled by obscurity and ambiguity.<sup>26</sup>

## V. Theopolitical Epilogue

After the publication of the "Religion and Zionism" essay, a debate between Cohen and Buber ensued, which Cohen summarizes as follows in his second reply to Buber's essay:

In this our political religiosity lies our practical difference from the Zionist one. Whereas the Zionist believes that Judaism can only be preserved in the form of total, unrestricted Jewish folkhood [*Volkstum*], we take the opposite position, namely that only universally human Judaism is able to preserve the Jewish religion.<sup>27</sup>

As a matter of fact, Buber asserts against Cohen that Jewish nationality – on the religious basis of which Cohen intended to establish a political relation to the non-Jewish state – is de facto in the process of dissolving given the pressure to assimilate exerted not least by antisemites. This nationality, Buber alleges, has become fictitious. "The Jews no longer have a nationality of their

<sup>25</sup> "Deutschtum und Judentum," ["Germanness and Judaism"], 279 (Engl. by trans.).

<sup>26</sup> "Deutschtum und Judentum," 310 (Engl. by trans.).

<sup>27</sup> *Jüdische Schriften*, 2:336.

own," Buber tersely asserts, referencing the Jewish Kantian Moritz Lazarus.<sup>28</sup> Yet, according to Buber, more than anything Liberal Judaism has lost its religious foundation, so the idea of an ethical messianism no longer corresponds to any political reality either. Rejecting the charge that Zionism has one-sidedly politicized "the nation" by placing it up against both Liberal Judaism and messianic religion, Buber brings into play Moses Hess's nation-based political messianism as a viable model for religious Zionism.<sup>29</sup>

Buber goes on to claim that Liberal Jews have all but forgotten what the "Sh'ma Israel"<sup>30</sup> creed of unity actually means, which is indeed why only Orthodox Jews and Zionists—for whom the project of reanimating the Hebrew language in Palestine is the only means to make sure that Jewish culture lives on—can be considered to be realizing true Jewish forms of life anymore.<sup>31</sup>

Buber's reply to Cohen—and similarly, Cohen's reply to that reply—only serves to reaffirm that, in the absence of any further polemical invectives from either side, the difference Cohen sees as obtaining between the two positions is one of fundamental incommensurateness. However, if one takes into account the position of the later, mature Buber, whose Hasidism-induced dialogical thought proceeds in the mode of a prophetic-messianic theopolitics beyond national-political sovereignty, then the aforementioned incommensurateness appears as a mere misunderstanding brought about by tumultuous times—which is not to deny that, as regards the difference in kind between the German-Jewish nationality and the Jewish-Palestinian

<sup>28</sup> Martin Buber, "Völker, Staaten und Zion" ["Peoples, States, and Zion"], in *Die Jüdische Bewegung* [The Jewish Movement] (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1920), 2:30. The complete quote goes as follows: "The Jews no longer have a nationality of their own; there is not a single Jew left who has an exclusively Jewish spirit" [Engl. by trans.]

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 42/43. Moses Hess, *Rom und Jerusalem. Die letzte Nationalitätenfrage*, (1862), Tel Aviv 1935. In English as Moses Hess, *Rome and Jerusalem: A Study in Jewish Nationalism*, trans. Meyer Waxman (New York: Bloch, 1918).

<sup>30</sup> "Völker, Staaten und Zion," 47.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 46. By way of conclusion, Buber summarizes this hostile stance as follows: "In this and similar ways we have begun to raise young people. And we will raise many others in a like manner, a prime selection of the novel Jewish spirit—Gideon's multitude, tested and sifted, to strive against their inner Midian, against fictitious Judaism." (50, Engl. by trans.)

community in Zion, only Buber's position was confirmed by the historical fact of the catastrophe of 1933.

Nevertheless, as far as their basic principles are concerned, Cohen and Buber's philosophies of religion share quite a few affinities and points of intersection:

1. Both theologies oppose the culture of assimilation and conversion in the context of German society. Both are defined by their concern for the genuine mission of Judaism and its national requirements.

2. Both theologies are based on a radical dialogical ethics. Cohen's *Religion of Reason* conceives the idea of the correlation of Ego and Alter as an ethical axis of the correlation of man and God. In many ways, Buber's philosophy of the I-Thou<sup>32</sup> can be understood as a continuation of Cohen's theory of correlation, given that Buber's I-Thou is itself another expression of the unmediated dialogical relationship between man and God.

3. In both cases, the respective dialogical ethics result in a prophetic-messianic theopolitics which in its championing the idea of a socialist community<sup>33</sup> has always already crossed the boundaries not only of nation and ethnos but thereby also of exclusive sovereign statehood and the capitalist system.

4. Consequently, in both conceptions the Jewish people assumes a special role in the establishment of the Kingdom of God<sup>34</sup>, a role which has always already excluded the possibility of any national or class-based and economic contraction.

5. Both ultimately find their respective models of dialogical ethics in a specifically dialogical bi-nationality which the Jewish people is tasked with realizing—according to Cohen, in a coalition with the German culture of enlightenment, and according to Buber, in the form of the utopian binational Jewish-Arab state in Zion.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* (Leipzig : Insel-Verlag, 1923). In English as Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970).

<sup>33</sup> Martin Buber, *Der utopische Sozialismus [Utopian Socialism]* (Cologne: Jakob Hegner, 1967), idem: *Pfade in Utopia [Paths in Utopia]* (1950) (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1985).

<sup>34</sup> Martin Buber, *Königtum Gottes*; idem., *Der Glaube der Propheten* ; idem., *Zwei Glaubensweisen [Two Kinds of Faith]* (Zürich: Manesse Verlag, 1950).

6. Both take the fusion of sovereign politics and religious sectarianism to be antithetical to a dialogical-ethical theopolitics. Cohen's revulsion of the unholy alliance of Zionist nationalism and Orthodox religion finds its counterpart in the later Buber's radical criticism of the Solomonic Temple cult. Given the contemporaneous absolute state of exception, Buber radically intensifies this criticism in the face of both Carl Schmitt's political theology and Friedrich Gogarten's political ethics of legitimizing the *Führerstaat* on the basis of the protestant religion of the Reich,<sup>35</sup> while also leveling it against Ben Gurion's sovereign coalition with Jewish Orthodoxy.<sup>36</sup>

Apart from their diverging opinions on the halakhah or the role of Christianity, the essential difference between Cohen and Buber's philosophies of religion concerns their respective geopolitical starting point—Cohen's nation in exile and Buber's Jewish-Zionist community (or statehood).

In accordance with the prophets' prediction, the history of Judaism throughout has taught us, says Cohen, that the realization of Judaism is tied to our dispersion among the peoples of this earth. We, however, have received the opposite doctrine from history: that here, living our life in dispersion and without self-determination, we cannot realize Judaism. [...] And we have received the opposite doctrine from the prophets, too. Among them is not one to whom dispersion would have seemed any different than it did to Jeremiah, on whom Cohen bases himself: 'As the stubble that passeth away by the wind of the wilderness'.<sup>37</sup>

The catastrophe of the Nazi seizure of power and the Shoah entirely obliterated Cohen's utopia of German-Jewish coalition on the ethico-religious

<sup>35</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie, Vier Kapitel von der Lehre der Souveränität* (1922) (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1995). In English as Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology. Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (1922), trans. by G. Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). F. Gogarten: *Politische Ethik* [Political Ethics], Jena 1932

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Martin Buber, *Ein Land und zwei Völker – Zur jüdisch-arabischen Frage*, ed. P. Mendes Flohr (Frankfurt Am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1983). In English as Martin Buber, *A Land of Two Peoples: Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs*, edited with commentary by Paul R. Mendes-Flohr (New York: Oxford University Press); 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1994).

<sup>37</sup> Martin Buber, "Der Staat und die Menschheit" ["The State and Mankind"], in *Die Jüdische Bewegung*, 2:64 [Engl. by trans.]

basis of the Enlightenment. As far as the future of the liberal Jewish nationality in Germany was concerned, Buber's Zionist will-to-life was to be proven right.

Yet Buber's model for a binational theopolitics in Israel-Palestine has, for now, failed as well. Any hope of a rapprochement between Jews and Palestinians seems to be diminishing by the day, given the unholy alliance between nationalism and Orthodox or fundamentalist religion which is becoming ever more prevalent on both sides.

The failure of the Arab Spring, marked by heretofore unknown types of fundamentalist terror and the return to Islamism-based forms of nationalist politics, has thus far found its equivalent in the terrorist splinter cells which exist among the Israeli settler movement but not directly in the official politics of Israel. However, the official politics of Israel appears to lean increasingly toward a nationalistic turn to the right. Safeguarded by its espousal of Orthodox Judaism, the State of Israel exhibits increasingly radical rhetoric when stifling, as it has long done, any discourse about the occupied Palestine territories by deploying the phrase of "Judea and Samaria." It also takes a stand in the fight against human rights concerns, vilified as left-wing and secular, and against the allegedly hostile liberal and democratic legal system. Consequently, the liberal theology of Reform Judaism, always already marginalized by the traditional coalition of Zionism and Orthodoxy, is forced back and—branded as an exponent of assimilation and secularization—finds itself increasingly under siege. This is illustrated not only by the ever-more aggravating conflict between the State of Israel and American Reform Judaism, but also by the disputes around the issue of the presence of (male and female) liberal rabbis at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, which have become more and more radical and are thus considered by the media to be symptomatic of the whole conflict.

Given the conditions under which Israeli politics presently operates and the global context of nationalist-religious renaissances with their newly anti-liberal front lines, it seems likely that a turn to Buber would have led to a better accommodation of the problem of unholy coalitions as it was raised by Cohen. Meanwhile, in the wake of the apocalypse of the German-Jewish utopia, the latter would presumably have come to a more positive estimation of Zionism if he had had to speak on its legitimacy after witnessing the Jewish people's

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fight for its very survival. A dialogical dispute might have inclined both sides to attempt a critical re-evaluation of the idea of the national sovereignty of the Jewish state as a whole. One may find certain dispositions for such a reappraisal in both Buber's anarchic theopolitics and Cohen's insistence on the important status of a transnational Jewish community for life in exile. Indeed, the fact of its catastrophic destruction in Nazi Germany notwithstanding, Cohen's ideal of a coalition between Jewish and Protestant ethics still bears relevance for our own time—one need only consider the situation in North America, where something akin to Reform Judaism is adhered to by the majority of Jewish people. In any event, the present coalition between the state, which makes recourse to ethno-religious principles, and Orthodox Judaism, which assumes an increasingly nationalistic shape, would have been cause for great concern on the part of both philosophers, potentially laying the groundwork for a coalition between the Zionist and diasporic critique of the present politico-theological sovereignty, drawing initiative from the spirit of a messianic ethics.

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