

SPINOZA AND ZIONISM

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I. Introduction

On the surface, this would appear to be a strange topic. Spinoza lived from 1632 to 1677, two full centuries before the Zionist movement was founded. He obviously had never heard of Zionism per se, and any suggestion as to what he might have thought about it would be pure speculation.

Yet the charge of speculation shall not deter us, for the subject of this essay is too compelling to ignore. Zionism has become one of the most controversial and important movements in the contemporary world, with implications as to geo-politics, political philosophy, cultural studies, and religion. Spinoza was a Jewish thinker who is among our species' most insightful observers of the human condition. I couldn't resist the opportunity to scour his writings for profound principles that are relevant to the Zionism debate. The goal of this essay is to elucidate those principles so as to inform our own thinking about the merits of Zionism. By "Zionism," I will be referring to the drive to create an independent state, composed primarily of self-identifying Jews that is located in part or all of the Biblical land of Zion.

Zionism does not necessarily entail the drive to create a state that establishes Judaism as a national religion. Unlike in Spinoza's day, millions of Jews now strongly identify with their ethnicity or their ancestral homeland but have little interest in religion, Jewish or otherwise. While we cannot know how Spinoza would have reacted to these people, or for that matter to Reform or Reconstructionist Jews, nor is it necessary for us to confront those issues in order to take lessons from Spinoza on how to evaluate Zionism as we have defined it.

Moreover, given that there already exists a Jewish state in the contemporary world and there exists no serious movement today to provide the Jews their own state in another part of the world, I will not address the issue of whether there can or should be a Jewish state located

outside of the Middle East. Instead, I will simply assume that if there is to be a Jewish state, it will be in the land of Zion, but the question remains: do the high-minded principles of Spinoza support or undermine the existence of such a state?

Speaking personally, I've decided that Spinozism leads to a qualified Zionism. But I readily acknowledge that others may reasonably disagree. The fact is that there is plenty of material in Spinoza's philosophy to support Zionists and anti-Zionists alike. This is hardly surprising, given that despite Spinoza's remarkable internal consistency, his teachings can be found on both sides of so many conventional philosophical debates.

II. The Spinoza-As-Proto-Zionist Trope

If you were to grab a knowledgeable historian at a cocktail party and ask her about Spinoza's perspective on Zionism, the response you'd likely hear would center around a single passage near the end of Chapter 3 of the *Tractatus Theological-Politicus* or "TTP." In reference to the Jewish people, Spinoza said,

As to their continued existence for so many years when scattered and stateless, this is in no way surprising, since they have separated themselves from other nations to such a degree as to incur the hatred of all, and this not only through external rites alien to the rites of other nations but also through the mark of circumcision, which they most religiously observe. That they are preserved largely through the hatred of other nations is demonstrated by historical fact. ...

The mark of circumcision, too, I consider to be such an important factor in this matter that I am convinced that this by itself will preserve their nation forever. Indeed, were it not that the fundamental principles of their religion discourage manliness, I would not hesitate to believe that they will one day, given the opportunity – such is the mutability of human affairs – establish once more their independent state, and that God will again choose them.¹

¹ *Spinoza, Complete Works*, Samuel Shirley, Translator (*Complete Works*), Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002, p. 425.

That passage, written nearly 300 years before the formation of a Jewish state, suggested that if the Jews could simply summon the “manliness,” they would have their own “independent state.” I read the passage more as a description of how Jews have lived in the past and may choose to live in the future, rather than as a proscription of how they ought to live. For me, Spinoza stopped well short of personally endorsing Zionism. Yet the fact remains that he went far enough in that direction to inspire some of the foremost names in early-Zionist history.

Moses Hess was one such thinker. According to historian Daniel Schwartz, Hess’s *Rome and Jerusalem*, published in 1862, was “the first sustained argument for a modern, secular Jewish nationalism.”² In that book, Hess wrote that “Spinoza conceived Jerusalem as a nationality (see the end of the third chapter of his theological tractate) and held that the restoration of the Jewish kingdom depends entirely on the courage of the Jewish people.”³

Hess’ work largely paved the trail for the creation of Zionism. Indeed, Theodore Herzl, who is generally considered the founder of the Zionist movement, referred to Hess as the “finest fruit of Judaism since Spinoza.”⁴ When Hess gave his imprimatur to Spinoza, future Jewish nationalists listened -- and they weren’t only listening to one passage in the *TTP*. Hess, you see, was a lover of Spinoza’s metaphysical philosophy generally, and this affection for that philosophy was taken up by some of his Zionist successors. The most notable example is David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of the modern state of Israel.

Ben-Gurion called Spinoza “in a certain sense the first Zionist of the last three hundred years.”⁵ As Schwartz points out, Ben-Gurion turned Spinoza into not merely a Zionist, but one of the movement’s “founding fathers.”⁶ In Ben-Gurion’s eyes, Spinoza’s philosophy was tailor made for a *secular* Jewish state, which is how the early 20th century Zionist pioneers envisioned the state of Israel. Ben-Gurion credited Spinoza for beginning to infuse the spirit of science into Judaism. However, Ben-Gurion also recognized that Spinoza did not go so far as to demand that

²Daniel Schwartz, *The First Modern Jew: Spinoza and the History of an Image (First Modern Jew)*, Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 2012, p. 120.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Adventures of Immanence*, Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1989, p. 73.

⁵ *First Modern Jew*, p. 124.

⁶ *Ibid.*

all beliefs rest on scientific demonstrations. Rather, Ben-Gurion pointed out, Spinoza never ceased to maintain his devotion to the Biblical principle that earthly objects and ideas are mere “manifestations of a higher unity.”⁷

For men like Hess, Herzl and Ben-Gurion, Spinoza wasn’t simply a philosopher who was born a Jew, he was a *Jewish* philosopher in the highest sense of that word. Indeed, to the early Zionists, Spinoza was an exemplar of what a Jewish philosopher must be if he is to take seriously the Socratic maxim that a servant of the truth follows the voice of reason wherever it leads. Certainly, there was no questioning Spinoza’s authenticity as a Jewish scholar, or his devotion to the fundamental ethical teachings of the Jews. Spinoza was steeped in the Hebrew language to the point where he wrote an entire book on Hebrew grammar. Spinoza was steeped in Jewish Scripture and history, as was reflected in the *TTP*, which focused largely on those topics. Spinoza was also so celebrated for his personal commitment to living an ethical life that Bernard Russell wrote the following about him in Russell’s *the History of Western Philosophy*: “Spinoza ...is the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers. Intellectually some others have surpassed him, but ethically he is supreme.”⁸ Moreover, despite his heresies, Spinoza remained devoted to the principle of ultimate unity and to the name of God. For the founders of Zionism, Spinoza remained true to the highest demands of Judaism despite the weighty challenges of modernity.

Yet what was especially appealing about Spinoza to a secular Zionist like Ben-Gurion wasn’t just his authenticity as a Jewish scholar and mensch, but the original direction in which Spinoza took Judaism as a *faith*. Spinoza’s *TTP* contained a Scriptural hermeneutic that sought to interpret the Scriptures based on a matter-of-fact analysis of their originally intended meaning, much like a scientist would interpret a natural phenomenon. Spinoza refused to assume that the Torah was the product of a supernatural deity who both infused the document with hidden wisdom and ensured that, at its core, it would speak the truth. Like Ben-Gurion, Spinoza believed that the stories of Biblical miracles, considered literally, simply were not true. To Spinoza, Jews mustn’t wait for a supernatural God to save them, just like they mustn’t read

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁸ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972, p. 569.

supernatural causes into their history – according to Spinoza, whatever happens here on earth is strictly the product of natural powers.

For Ben-Gurion, Spinozism stands for the principle that it is the job of the Jewish people to take the bull by the horns and make their own history – and if this requires a certain level of “manliness” to become a sovereign and free people, so be it. Given that the philosophies of the early-Zionist leaders generally did not make room for divine intervention, how else but by extolling a faith grounded in naturalism and the value of “manliness” could they expect the Jews to create a successful republic when surrounded by so many hostile neighbors?

III. The Spinoza-as-Anti-Zionist Response

There is no denying Spinoza’s historical influence on the early-Zionist movement, but that hardly demonstrates Spinozism’s compatibility with Zionism. It may be that people like Hess and Ben-Gurion were thinking with their hearts instead of their heads and closing their eyes to various ways in which Spinozism is antithetical to Zionism. For starters, an argument can be made that Zionism is, in essence, a type of tribalism, whereas Spinoza’s philosophy is as universalistic socially as it is metaphysically.

Spinoza is hardly the kind of guy who would ask the question, “but is it good for the Jews?” His question would be “but is it good for oneself?” and his answer would depend on whether the thing at issue is good for humankind as a whole. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza wrote that “The good which every man who pursues virtue aims at for himself he will also desire for the rest of mankind ...”⁹ To Spinoza, whenever people live “under the guidance of reason,” they “always necessarily agree in nature.”¹⁰

So, one might ask, if high-mindedness entails working for the betterment of humankind as a whole, and if our voices of reason are ultimately compatible regardless of who we are or where we come from, why would we introduce the divisive force of tribalism into the mix? Wouldn’t that simply sow the seeds of conflict and disaster?

⁹ *Complete Works*, p. 339 (Part IV, Proposition 37).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 337 (IV, P. 35).

Spinoza's appreciation for social universalism is as apparent from the *TTP* as it is from the *Ethics* – and he makes that point in a way that would have surely caused the early Zionists to shudder. Specifically, Spinoza lambasted the Jews for seeing themselves as God's chosen people and for viewing their gentile neighbors in hateful terms. The same Chapter 3 of the *TTP* that contained Spinoza's so-called proto-Zionist passage also contained some of his most famous criticisms of Jewish nationalism. There, he attributed to the "Pharisees" (a word he used to refer to Orthodox Jews generally) the chauvinistic doctrine that the gift of prophesy "was peculiar to their nation, whereas other nations ... foretold the future with the aid of some diabolical power."¹¹ To that, Spinoza contrasted the universalistic teachings of Paul, including the propositions that "God is the God of both Jews and Gentiles" and that "to all men ... was revealed the law under which all men lived – namely, the law which has regard only to the true virtue, not that law which is established to suit the requirements of a particular state and is adapted to the character of one nation."¹² Since, according to Spinoza, the ritual laws of the Torah are only binding in a particular place and time, it would be difficult for him to argue that a modern Jewish state is needed to establish those ritual commandments as the law of the land, or to make a special effort to honor holidays that are based on those laws.

It is safe to say that Spinoza was not the kind of Jewish philosopher who exhibited a visceral pro-Semitic chauvinism. After his vitriolic excommunication by his own Jewish community in Amsterdam, Spinoza's feelings about the Jewish people were ambivalent. Yes, he praised the ancient Hebrews for their form of governance and all it entailed, including the enlightened way the Jews dealt with poverty. But his writings as a whole do not reflect any special enthusiasm for the Jewish people or their faith. In one passage, he stated that "the Hebrews were not required as a religious duty to practice piety toward peoples who were not party to the contract, but only toward their fellow citizens."¹³ If that isn't enough of an insult when offered from the mouth of a social universalist, consider also that Spinoza, who devoted

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 422.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 423.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 552 (*TTP*, Ch. 17). Spinoza defined piety as "[t]he desire to do good which derives from our living by the guidance of reason. *Ibid.*, p. 339. (E IV, P. 37, Scholium 1.)

his entire being to the love of philosophy, wrote in the *TTP* that “the Jews ... despised philosophy.”¹⁴

At the very end of Chapter 3 of the *TTP*, Spinoza said that “in respect of understanding and true virtue, there is no distinction between one nation and another, and in regard to these matters God has not chosen one nation before another.”¹⁵ That is a fair summary of his views as to the overall merits of the Jewish nation and its members – that they are neither better nor worse than the Gentiles. What’s more, there is no reason to believe that the author of the *Ethics* and the *TTP* – *i.e.*, the post-excommunication Spinoza – self-identified as a Jew. But he never denied that the Jews were a nation, or that they were understood as such not only by themselves but also by the Gentiles.

In the subsequent sections of this paper, we will turn to two overarching questions: would Spinoza’s philosophy, considered in the aggregate, affirm that the Jewish nation warrants its own independent state? And, if so, would the creation of that state come with any qualifications? I have already indicated that for me, Spinozism would answer both questions in the affirmative. But before explaining why, allow me to address what could be the most telling counter-argument against my thesis. It rests on the idea that I have become so blinded by the virtues of Zionism in theory, that I have ignored the *inherent* vices of Zionism in practice.

Consider for a moment the example that Spinoza set by the way he lived his life. When he was 40 years old, Spinoza was offered what from all appearances would be the ideal job: a chair in philosophy at the University of Heidelberg. Yet he turned it down, preferring instead to continue to toil away as a lens grinder – and seven years later, this lens grinder would die from an illness to his lungs. Why did Spinoza turn down the opportunity of a lifetime? Among other reasons, he was concerned that as a professor, he would be viewed as a representative of the university and would not be free to teach heretical doctrines about religion.

Spinoza prided himself in his realism and refused to romanticize the job of the university professor, no matter how tempting it must have been to do so. I suspect that if he were forced to consider the possibility of the Jews of Europe and elsewhere converging on a tiny location in the

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 503 (*TTP*, Ch. 11).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 426.

Middle East, where there already existed a group of gentiles with ties to the land, he similarly would have opened up his eyes to the obvious potential for conflict and the implications it would have on the Jewish people, not to mention their neighbors.

Just recall his words in Chapter 3 of the *TTP*: “Were it not that the fundamental principles of their religion discourage manliness” the Jews would surely welcome the opportunity to establish an independent state. In essence, Spinoza is arguing that in order realistically to establish such a state, the Jews would have to violate the fundamental principles of their faith. To be sure, as the early-Zionists argued, “manliness” might be taken to be a positive trait associated with such virtues as strength, courage, and resolve. But what if it were taken a bit further, to connote militarism, aggression, and rapacity? Many contemporary Jews have argued that those are precisely the characteristics that have proven most effective for the Zionists to subdue the residents of their new neighborhood, *and* that it was inevitable for these traits to gain ascendancy over the Israeli mindset if the Jews were to gain power over the land. It would not be rational, the argument continues, to approve of Zionism as a theory unless one is willing to accept the consequences of turning the Jews into people that are less universalistic, less dispassionate, less compassionate ... in short, less Spinozist.

To paraphrase a quote from Spinoza’s favorite Scripture, the Christian Bible, “What good will it be for a people if they gain the whole world, yet forfeit their souls?”¹⁶ I, for one, do not believe that the creation of the modern state of Israel necessarily entails a permanent change in the soul of the Jewish people away from a universalistic ethic and toward a zero-sum-game ethic. After all, people adjust to changes in circumstances, Israelis continue to pine for peace, and if Israel were ever to come to know peace, the souls of the Israelis would surely become more gentle and empathic. But I do recognize that there is power in the counter-arguments to my position, and that a heavy burden falls on the Jewish people of the future to prove me right.

IV. How Spinoza’s View of the Human Condition Is Conducive to Zionism

¹⁶ See Matthew 16:26.

To appreciate most deeply how Spinozism relates to Zionism, it is critical to grasp Spinoza's basic view of the human condition. So let us first take a look at that view, and then circle back to focusing on Zionism in particular.

Despite being associated with determinism, Spinoza's philosophy is not one of crude fatalism. He believed that armed with the power of reason, individuals can change our emotions, our behavior, and our world in a more high-minded direction. This entails studying our passions, cultivating those passions that allow us to live in social harmony, and recognizing that all people are expressions of a single infinite, all-encompassing beloved, who Spinoza called "God."

In this philosophy, enlightenment requires no supernatural grace and is clearly within the grasp of human beings, as long as we honor our reasoning faculty. As we have noted, Spinoza believed that if only people were forever reasonable, we would always live in harmony with one another. (E IV., P. 35) In such a utopian world, all states would be internally and externally at peace, and they would be designed so as to cultivate the talents and interests of their citizens. The idea of Zionism would thus excite far less emotion on either side, for Jews would be happy in whatever states they found themselves and so would Gentiles.

Ah, but that is not the world we live in, according to Spinoza, nor would it be prudent to design political institutions based on the expectation that we will come to live in such a world. Spinoza's philosophy is one of hard-headed realism. While he recognized the ability of particular *individuals* to become disciples of reason, he viewed such individuals as rare exceptions. To Spinoza, the masses of human beings are ruled not by reason but by their passions and the so-called "superstitions" that flow from them.

Spinoza's view of human beings as they actually are, and not as utopians would like to characterize them, is set forth in detail in his *Ethics*. "Appetite," he taught, "is the very essence of man insofar as his essence is determined to such actions as contribute to his preservation."¹⁷ Because Spinoza taught that, for any living thing (including people), the impulse to persist in one's own being "is nothing but the actual essence of the thing itself,"¹⁸ it follows that human beings are controlled primarily by our appetites— or, in other words, our emotions. According to

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 311 (E III, Definitions of the Emotions, No. 1.)

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 283 (E III, P. 7).

Spinoza, “human power is very limited and is infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes,”¹⁹ and these external causes are very much at play in determining the pleasures, pains, and desires that define our essence.

Spinoza believed that human emotions create needs for fellowship and cooperation, but also create the conditions for conflict. In Part IV of the *Ethics*, he wrote that

It is of the first importance to men to establish close relationships and to bind themselves with such ties as may most effectively unite them into one body, and, as an absolute rule, to act in such a way as serves to strengthen friendship. But to this end skill and watchfulness are needed. For men are changeable (few there are who live under the direction of reason), and yet for the most part envious, and more inclined to revenge than to compassion.²⁰

In the *TTP*, Spinoza used vivid terms to show just how far afield we are from the type of rational individuals who can be trusted to form harmonious social institutions. He began that treatise with the following words:

If men were able to exercise complete control over all their circumstances, or if continuous good fortune were always their lot, they would never be prey to superstition. But since they are often reduced to such straits as to be without any resource, and their immoderate greed for fortune’s fickle favours often makes them the wretched victims of alternating hopes and fears, the result is that, for the most part, their credulity knows no bounds. In critical times they are swayed this way or that by the slightest impulse, especially so when they are wavering between the emotions of hope and fear, yet at other times they are overconfident, boastful and arrogant.²¹

That is the human animal, as depicted by Spinoza, and he never gave the impression that he expected this portrait to change any time soon. But the fact remains that those who are devoted to reason are capable of using their wisdom to make the best out of a difficult set of circumstances. In his short life, Spinoza had completed one political treatise, the *TTP*, and was on his way to completing a second when he passed away. He was determined to identify the political-economic principles that are critical to creating the most harmonious societies possible.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 362 (E IV, Appendix, No. 32).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 359 (E IV, Appendix No. 12-13).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 388 (Preface to the *TTP*).

He spoke of the importance of preserving freedom of thought, speech, and religion, providing for the needs of the poor, establishing democratic institutions, and creating a separation of powers. Above all else, he wished to cultivate the conditions whereby citizens can feel loyalty to their states and behave as virtuously as possible as a result of such loyalty, rather than as a result of fear. When someone as God-intoxicated as Spinoza wrote that “There can be no doubt that devotion to one’s country is the highest form of devotion that can be shown,”²² we can infer that such an extreme call for patriotism was moved primarily by his concerns with the alternative -- a land filled with people who lack such devotion, fill their hearts with resentment for those who control the government, and react quite predictably with violence. For Spinoza, who taught in his *Political Treatise* that the “virtue of a state is its security,”²³ violence is absolutely abhorrent.

It is with that background in mind that we consider what Spinozism as both an ethical and political philosophy has to teach us about Zionism. Spinoza saw the Jews as a people who have been set apart, both by their own efforts and by the prejudices of others, and who fundamentally self-identified as members of the Jewish people, not merely as individuals. Here are his words from the *TTP*:

The patriotism of the Hebrews, was not simply patriotism but piety, and this, together with hatred for other nations, was so fostered and nourished by their daily ritual that it inevitably became part of their nature. For their daily worship was not merely quite different, making them altogether unique and completely distinct from other peoples, but also utterly opposed to others. Hence, this daily invective ... was bound to engender a lasting hatred of a most deep rooted kind, since it was a hatred that had its source in strong devotion or piety and was believed to be a religious duty – for that is the bitterest and most persistent of all kinds of hatred. And this was reinforced by the universal cause of the continuous growth of hatred, to wit, the reciprocation of hatred; for the other nations inevitably held them in bitter hatred in return.²⁴

In that same chapter of the *TTP*, Spinoza remarked that the “Hebrew citizens could enjoy a good life only in their own country; abroad, they could expect only hurt and humiliation,” and

²² *Ibid.*, p. 560 (*TTP* Chapter 19).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 682 (*Political Treatise*, Chapter 1, Section 6).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 547 (*TTP*, Chapter 17).

that for the Hebrews, “their native soil . . . alone was held to be holy ground, the rest of the world being unclean and profane.”²⁵ In those passages, Spinoza was referring to the ancient Jews. But he could just as easily have been talking about the Jews of his era. One hardly has to be a historian to recognize the passionate longing that they felt for their ancestral home in the land of Zion, or their resentment for living in a world where Jewish communities served in subordinate positions to one civilization after another that was neither more virtuous nor learned than their own.

It is not, of course, the role of Spinozism to provide for the needs of only a single “people.” But just as the Spinozist statesman must take care to ensure that all individuals in a state can feel the cause to be patriotic, the Spinozist geo-politician must take care to ensure that there is no group of people – let alone a great nation – who justifiably feel oppressed as a result of their ubiquitous minority status. Spinoza philosophized at a time and place where Jews were not particularly assimilated – they worshipped differently, dressed differently, and looked differently from the population at large. Precisely three hundred years after Spinoza’s birth, the world offered two prominent examples of prosperous, largely-assimilated Jewish communities that existed within democratic societies, both of which held elections. One society chose Franklin Roosevelt as its leader; the other chose Adolf Hitler. Both elections, and the consequences that stemmed from them (including the way Roosevelt turned a blind eye to the victims of Hitler’s terror when they attempted to land on American shores), had their own lessons to teach Jews, be they Orthodox or secular. These lessons, and those from so many other states throughout history, all seemed to point in the same direction – that if the Jews wanted freedom, security, and justice for themselves and for their tribespeople around the world, they would have to create their own independent nation-state. No other state could be trusted to protect fundamental Jewish interests.

Spinozism is replete with principles that would demonstrate not only the strength of the Jews’ longing for their own state, but various legitimate rationales for such a longing. The first, and arguably foremost, rationale is grounded in the love of justice. In the *TTP*, Spinoza spoke about the idea of justice as “the steadfast and constant will to render to each his own,” and he

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 547, 546 (*TTP*, Chapter 17).

spoke of injustice in the *Ethics* in terms of an intention “to rob someone of what is his.”²⁶ We who love justice therefore wish to render to individuals what they deserve and not to rob anyone of his or her rights. But if that principle applies to our dealings with individuals, why should it not also apply to our dealings with those institutions and other collectives to which human beings are especially attached emotionally?

In the case of the Jews, they enjoyed various degrees of national autonomy during antiquity and at times even enjoyed complete national independence. However, this independence was frequently ripped away from them, culminating in the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. What followed was nearly 2000 years of a stateless condition that sometimes involved expulsion, slavery or worse. Clearly, there is much more to Jewish history than the story of subjugation and abuse. For example, historians have determined that it was not uncommon for Jews living in the diaspora to be granted a fair amount of autonomy over their local communities. Still, there is no honest way of arguing that the Jewish people have generally operated on level playing field with those who controlled the states that took them in. And while the period of Jewish statelessness continued, century after century, one relevant fact has reigned above all others: just as those who subjugated the Jews pined for a time and place in the hereafter where they could enjoy eternal, heavenly bliss, these stateless Jews pined simply for a time and place *on Earth* where they could enjoy what other peoples had come to take for granted -- a state that is not robbed from them by a more powerful empire. So, a Spinozist might ask, if the Greeks, Italians, Germans, Chinese and Arabs have their own states, wouldn't justice require that the Jews be allowed to receive a stable, secure state of their own?

Secondly, even if we leave aside principles of justice, we must consider the benefits to the world as to whole, as well as to the Jews in particular, of creating a large space that fosters Jewish self-expression and autonomy. As a social historian, Spinoza praised the tremendous success of the ancient Jews when they controlled their own state and used it to create enlightened social institutions (like the separation of powers) that were ahead of their time. The memory of that success, which is taught to all Jews, surely has fueled their longing over the centuries for a

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 427 (*TTP*, Chapter 4); *ibid.*, p. 341 (E IV. P. 37, Scholium 2). See also *ibid.*, p. 689 (*Political Treatise*, Chapter 2) (“a man is called just who has the constant will to render to every man his own; and he is called unjust who endeavours to appropriate to himself what belongs to another”).

new Jerusalem. But shouldn't those lessons from ancient history also remind the rest of the world of the benefits that could result if a contemporary Jewish civilization was allowed to flourish in peace? Today, Israel has widely come under attack for the way it has dealt with its Palestinian neighbors and citizens, and rightfully so, I might add. Yet the question must be asked: if the Israelis and Palestinians could somehow forge a path for peace, might we not see a more universal appreciation for the Jewish State as a "light onto the nations,"²⁷ or at least as a bearer of useful and unique contributions?

Moreover, just as Jewish self-expression could pay dividends to nations far and wide, the benefits to those Jews who live in the land of Zion could be incalculable. As we have seen, Spinoza stood for the principle that all things strive to persist in their own being, and indeed, he repeatedly commented about the ability of the Jewish people to survive despite their minority status. Clearly, that survival is an important source of pride for the Jews, and its continuation would presumably be made much easier if the Jews had a state of their own. Yet it is one thing to survive as a people, and an even greater thing to *thrive*. To a Spinozist, thriving requires living under the conditions of freedom, which in turn requires an ample degree of self-determination. After all, near the beginning of the *Ethics*, Spinoza wrote that "that thing is said to be free which exists solely from the necessity of its nature, and is determined to action by itself alone."²⁸ Historically, it has been difficult for Jews living in the diaspora to achieve conditions conducive to maximal self-expression, especially when they have been ghettoized in Christian Europe or living "under the shadow of Islam" in the Middle East.²⁹

As Spinoza explained in the *Ethics*, "A man is bound to be part of Nature and to follow its universal order, but if he dwells among individuals who are in harmony with [that] man's nature, by that very fact his power of activity will be assisted and fostered."³⁰ For centuries, Jewish people have witnessed this principle in action, as the members of one gentile civilization after another, each armed with a unique culture, language, history, and land, revel in the treasures

²⁷ This phrase comes from Isaiah, 49:6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 217 (E I., Definition 7).

²⁹ Notably, the phrase "under the shadow of Islam" can be found in Article 6 of the Hamas Charter, which states that only in that capacity could members of all faiths safely coexist. See http://middleeast.about.com/od/palestinepalestinians/a/me080106b_2.htm

³⁰ *Complete Works*, p. 359 (E. IV., Appendix No. 7).

that have emerged from being able to express themselves in harmony with their countrymen. You will forgive the Jews for wanting their own opportunity to show the world what institutions, monuments, and other cultural achievements they can produce if allowed to flourish in their own homeland as the primary residents. And you will also forgive the Jews for viewing this desire through the lens of justice.

For these reasons, one can envision the Jewish people longing for Zion based purely on affirmative desires to create something beautiful – a thriving, autonomous state in which Jews can express themselves without outside inference and in a way that demonstrates to the world what is uniquely worthwhile about their culture or their faith. One does not have to be chauvinistic or even fearful to desire such a state. It is supportable based purely on the desire of Jews to seek justice and freedom for their own people.

Yet there is another fundamental reason why Spinozism leads to Zionism, and that is because of the paramount need to preserve physical security. Today, unlike in Spinoza’s era, a majority-Jewish state exists in an area that is also claimed by an Arab people who self-identify as Palestinians and who have deep ties to the same land. To most anti-Zionists, the only appropriate way to resolve this dispute is with a “one-state solution,” which involves the creation of a large, democratic state that may well come to serve a predominately Arab population. Palestinians in the peace movement view such an outcome as preferable because it allows both peoples to enjoy all the land that they love so deeply. Spinozism, however, would surely lead us to question whether the Jews and the non-Israeli Palestinians could peacefully and profitably co-exist in such a state.

Recall the statement from the *TTP* that the hatred stemming from devotion or piety is the most bitter and persistent of all. That type of hatred surely applies to the emotions that are flaring up on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where many members of these two peoples feel both religious and historical ties to the disputed land. Also relevant to this contemporary conflict are various statements from Part III of the *Ethics*, such as, “he who hates someone will endeavor to injure him unless he fears that he will suffer a greater injury in return,” “he who imagines he is hated by someone to whom he believes he has given no cause for hatred will hate him in return,” and “hatred is increased by reciprocal hatred.”³¹

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 298-300 (E III. P. 39, 40, 43).

No philosopher could have attained Spinoza's stature without taking love seriously, but that wasn't enough for this hard-headed philosopher. He also felt compelled to take *hatred* seriously. Indeed, while Spinoza extolled love above all else, he was ever mindful of the opposite emotion and the role that it has played in human interactions. Even leaving aside his philosophical writings, this is a man who wore a signet ring bearing the inscription of "Caute," meaning caution. If he were called upon to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, I suspect he would propose that these two peoples ask for a divorce, rather than counting on living in a single state where the Jewish and Palestinian multitudes reside together like the lion and lamb in Isaiah's prophesy. Remember, that for Spinoza, successful states require a deep loyalty from all their citizens. Here, we have a perfect storm in which two peoples from different ethnicities and religions are both fighting over "holy" land and harboring a sense of being a historically oppressed people. Under these circumstances, it is much easier to imagine patriotic loyalty when individuals either hold majority status in their own state or have voluntarily opted to live in a state controlled primarily by the "other."

Imagining members of either people to live, involuntarily, as minorities living a land controlled by their rival's government would seem to be a formula for the continuation of a conflict that many view to be hopelessly intractable. Spinoza, however, was ultimately a man of hope, and not of fear. He would be ever-mindful of the prospects of a peaceful solution and ever-willing to entertain non-utopian means of finding one.

V. Why Any Zionism That Emerges from Spinozism Must Be Conceived within a Universalist Framework

As we have seen, if the issue raised by Zionism is whether an independent majority-Jewish state in the land of Zion is in the best interests of the Jewish people in particular, I believe that Spinozism answers that question in the affirmative. But Spinoza's philosophy is above all else one of universalism, and the Spinozist thinker is forever urged to perceive the world "from the standpoint of eternity." Clearly, from such a standpoint, any effort to protect the interests of one people at the expense of another would be simply an exercise in turning planet Earth into the HMS Titanic and devoting our time to rearranging the deck chairs. Spinoza would never countenance such folly.

Ultimately, the justification for Zionism in Spinoza's philosophy carries with it a similar argument for Palestinian nationalism. Palestinians can also muster arguments based on

historical oppression, devotion to their ancestral land, and the desire for justice, freedom of self-expression, and security. If these arguments are compelling for the Jews, simple logic would suggest that they are similarly compelling for the Palestinians.

What's more, those Jews who are sincere in their devotion to both Zionism and Spinozism are compelled to take the time to recognize their biases. That's what Spinozists do, they strip bear the causes of their own emotions so as to no longer be enslaved by any passion that runs contrary to the voice of reason. Once these Spinozist, Zionist Jews engage in this exercise, most will realize that their visceral tendency is to give but cursory attention to the legitimate needs of the Palestinians and show a robust concern for the needs of the Jews. This tendency must be confronted and corrected. For these Jews, the path of wisdom, harmony and balance lies in making it a priority actively to advance the cause of Palestinian nationalism, consistent with the overarching goal of facilitating a stable, secure two-state solution. In the process, they will encounter legions of Palestinians who have no interest in such a solution and plenty of Jews who have contempt for the whole idea of Zionism, but that shouldn't change their commitment to working for the commonsensical idea that the Palestinians must have a viable state if the Jews are to have a peaceful state of their own. Trust me, laboring for that cause can be absolutely exasperating. Then again, as Spinoza said in the very last line of the *Ethics*, "all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare."³²

At bottom, Spinoza was an individualist, not a person whose loyalties extended primarily to groups. But he recognized that people naturally form allegiances to groups, and those groups become part of their self-identities. He further recognized that different laws and customs can shape, in each nation, a particular character, mode of life and set of attitudes that makes that nation unique.³³ Neither the Jewish nor the Palestinian self-identity or particular character is likely to leave this planet any time soon. Nor are these peoples likely to accept a scenario where one lives under the control of another, be it in a stateless condition or as minorities in a democracy where the "other" is numerically dominant.

Under the circumstances, the job of a Spinozist universalist is to find a way to nurture and manage the aspirations of both tribes so that they can enjoy the fruits of freedom and security without infringing on the legitimate needs of their neighbors. This requires a divorce

³² *Ibid.*, p. 382 (E V. P. 42).

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 548 (TTP, Ch. 17).

that is based on equitable principles and the respect for the dignity of both peoples – while also recognizing the legitimate security challenges that the region faces given its tiny size and its history of violence.

So yes, as ugly as the word “divorce” sounds, it appears from a Spinozist standpoint to be the appropriate solution for a very difficult and dangerous equation. Perhaps someday, however, once an equitable divorce between the Jews and Palestinians has helped to dissipate their mutual hatred and fear, we can see these two peoples interact as model neighbors. After all, if I may quote the title of Proposition 43 of Part 3 of the *Ethics* in its entirety, “Hatred is increased by reciprocal hatred, and may on the other hand be destroyed by love.”³⁴ To be a Zionist, a Palestinian Nationalist, and at the same time a Spinozist, is to recognize that hatred, but work to foster that love.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 300.