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Language editor: Suzan Meves

Secretary: Ms. Varda Aviani
Tel. +972-3-5318368 • Fax +972-3-7384102
Address: Yackobovitz Building 1002, floor 4, room 403
Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan 5290002, Israel
Email address: daat.philosophy@biu.ac.il
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Wissenschaft des Judentums

Judaism and the Science of Judaism
200 Years of Academic Thought on Religion

Guest Editors:

George Y. Kohler ◆ Andreas Brämer ◆ Thomas Meyer

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> For it is not impossible that a nation should have many leaders who convene, unite, and reach a consensus; they can thus govern and administer justice … Then also, why cannot they have terms of office…? When the turn of other magistrates comes to replace them, they will investigate the abuses of trust committed by earlier [magistrates]. Those found guilty will pay for their crimes … Finally, why cannot their powers be limited and determined by laws or norms?[1]

These lines of Don Isaac Abravanel's 1483-1484 commentary on 1 Samuel 8 earned him fame in 20th-century scholarship as the first early modern Jewish republican thinker.[2] In his 1937 article on the political conception of Abravanel, Herbert Finkelscherer (1903-1942) noted: "His fundamental position and refusal of monarchy were to remain unique and isolated in Jewish literature deep into the modern times."[3]

1 Abravanel, *Perush Abarbanel al Neviim*, *Shmuel*, Jerusalem, 2010, p. 96. For the translations from Hebrew of 1 Samuel 8, I relied (with a few changes) on Menachem Lorberbaum's English translation in *The Jewish Political Tradition, Volume 1: Authority*, ed. Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum, Noam J. Zohar, and Yair Lorberbaum (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 150-54.

2 For a first approach of the topic, see Aviezer Ravitzky, "Kings and Laws in Late Medieval Jewish Thought: Nissim of Gerona vs. Isaac Abrabanel," in Scholars and Scholarship: The Interaction between Judaism and Other Cultures, ed. Leo Landman (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1990), pp. 67-90; Avraham Melamed, *Ahotan haketana shel hahochmo*t (Hebrew) (Raanana: Open University Press, 2011), pp. 242-81,- 281 and also Melamed, *Wisdom's Little Sister: Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Political Thought* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2012), pp. 272-304.

3 "Seine [Isaac Abravanel] grundsätzliche Stellungnahme, seine ablehnende Haltung zur Monarchie dürfte in der Tat bis weit in die Neuzeit hinein im jüdischen Schrifttum vereinzelt dastehen." (Herbert Finkelscherer, "Quellen und Motive der Staats – und

The uniqueness of Abravanel's anti-monarchial views lasted until the times of enlightenment, revolutions and emancipation in the 18th and 19th centuries. Yet, the age of *Aufklärung*, *Romantik,* and *Wissenschaft des Judentums* did not bring renewed attention to Abravanel's theological and political thought.[4] On the contrary, the first book devoted to Abravanel, Jacob Guttmann's 1916 *Die religionsphilosophischen Lehren des Isaak Abravanel* (The Philosophical-Religious Doctrines of Isaac Abravanel), "omitted" a study of Abravanel's political ideas, while declaring him the "last of the Jewish writers, who could still claim a place in the history of Jewish philosophy of religion" (*der letzte unter den jüdischen Schriftstellern, der einen Platz in jüdischen Religionsphilosophie beanspruchen darf*).[5] For Guttmann, Abravanel was defined as a figure of decline, as the end of Jewish medieval rationality; he could not be seen as the first modern Jewish political thinker, a title reserved for Spinoza or Mendelssohn: "Spinoza, who took another path [than the Maimonidean-Aristotelian one], owed to Jewish literature some seminal stimuli, yet he could no longer be counted among the Jewish thinkers."[6] Abravanel was thus more than a negative historical figure: his life and work served as a marker for a new historical period in which Jewish philosophy disappeared. This generated much anxiety among many of the exponents of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, who partly considered it their mission to relegate this obscure period to the past.

Abravanel's political thought remained largely unexplored until its rediscovery in the 20th century. The history of the modern rediscovery of Abravanel's political thought, as well as its philosophical and political context after the fall of the Weimar Republic in 1933, is relatively unknown. The following paragraphs are devoted to a first elucidation of this important chapter of early 20th-century Jewish scholarship.

The rediscovery of Abravanel's political thought occurred during the first years of the German Nazi regime, and can be attributed to the 1937 commemoration of the 500-year anniversary of Abravanel's birth, which brought Jewish scholars from Europe, Palestine, and the United States to study and write academic articles on Abravanel's political thought. Many

Gesellschaftsauffassung des Don Isaak Abravanel," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 81 [1937], p. 496.)

4 See Jean-Christophe Attias, "Isaac Abravanel: Between Ethnic Memory and National Memory," *Jewish Social Studies* 2 (1996): 137-155.

5 Jacob Guttmann, *Die Religionphilosophischen Lehren des Isaak Abravanel,* Breslau, 1916, p. 16.

6 *Ibid.*

of these commemorative publications dealt with the political aspect of Abravanel's life and work. In 1937, Ephraim Urbach published an article in *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* entitled *Die Staatsauffassung des Don Isaak Abravanel* (The Conception of State of Don Isaac Abravanel).[7] In 1938, Urbach immigrated to Palestine; after WWII, he became a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.[8] In the same 1937 issue of the *Monatsschrift*, Finkelscherer published an already mentioned article entitled *Quellen und Motive des Staats- und Gesellschafstauffassung von Don Isaak Abravanel* (Motives and Sources in Don Isaac Abravanel's Conception of State and Society).[9] Finkelscherer was most probably deported to Auschwitz and murdered there in 1942.[10] In a 1938 issue of the *Monatsschrift*, the journal's penultimate issue, Isaak Heinemann (1876-1957), a prominent Jewish scholar and the journal's chief editor, published an article entitled *Abravanels Lehre vom Niedergang der Menschheit* (Abravanel's Doctrine of the Decline of Humanity).[11] The following year, Heinemann immigrated to Palestine and joined the faculty of the Hebrew University. Yitzhak Baer's (1901-1993) Hebrew article, "Don Isaac Abravanel and his Attitude towards the Problems of History and State,"[12] published in the eighth issue of the young Hebrew Journal *Tarbiz*, and Leo Strauss' (1899-1973) English essay, "On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching,"[13] published in the University of Cambridge's volume entitled *Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures,* are the best-known contributions to early 20th-century writing on Abravanel and reflect opposing views on the subject. These two

7 Ephraim Urbach, "Die Staatsauffassung des Don Isaak Abravanel," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 81 (1937), pp. 257-270.

8 David Assaf (ed.), *Ephraim Elimelech Urbach*, Jerusalem: The World Association for Jewish Studies, 1993 (Hebrew).

9 Finkelscherer, "Quellen und Motive," pp. 496-508.

10 Michael Brocke and Julius Carlebach (eds.), *Die Rabbiner im Deutschen Reich 1871-1945*, vol. 2, pp. 2144-2145. See also the website of Yad Vashem: http://yvng.yadvashem.org/nameDetails.html?language=en&itemId=11496481&ind=0

11 Isaak Heinemann, "Abravanels Lehre vom Niedergang der Menschheit," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 82 (1938), pp. 381-400.

12 Yitzhaq Baer, "*Don Izhaq Abarbanel ve-yahso el bayot historiah ve-hamedinah*," *Tarbiz* 8 (1937), pp. 241-259.

13 Leo Strauss, "On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching," J. B. Trend and H. Loewe (eds.), *Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures*, Cambridge, 1937, pp. 95-129. See also Leo Strauss' remarks on Finkelscherer's article, Heinrich Bleier (ed.), *Leo Strauss Gesammelte Schriften Band 2 Philosophie und Gesetz,* Stuttgart und Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 1997, pp. 233-234.

scholars also differed in their paths out of Germany. In the 1920s, Baer, a young and promising historian, and Strauss, a provocative philosopher, were colleagues at the Berlin *Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*. After publishing the first volume of his ground-breaking *Die Juden im Christlichen Spanien* in 1929 by the *Akademie*'s publishing house, Baer immigrated to Palestine in 1930 and joined the Hebrew University faculty.[14] That same year, Strauss published his *Religionskritik Spinozas* by the same publishing house.[15] He left Germany for France and England in 1932, and later immigrated to the United States in 1937, joining the New School's faculty the following year.[16]

This brief and partial survey of the historical and editorial context in which the scholarly rediscovery of the political aspects of Abravanel's work occurred reveals that this shift was linked to the traumatic political experiences faced by these writers during the Weimar Republic and early Nazi period. It also deals with the broader question of Jewish political destiny in Europe and outside of it, in Palestine, in the United States, and in other places. Furthermore, this political shift, best exemplified by Baer and Strauss' articles, occurred in a context of Jewish emigration out of Europe, and in a context of internal and external challenges of German and European models of Jewish civil emancipation. In the following comparative study, I will discuss Baer and Strauss' contradicting contributions to the rediscovery of Abravanel's theological and political thought, and will also emphasize their value for an understanding of

14 Fritz Baer, *Die Juden im Christlichen Spanien*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1929-1936, vol. 1-2. Thomas Meyer, "Yitzhak Fritz Baer und Leo Strauss Über Galut", *Exil – Literatur – Judentum*, Berlin 2016, pp. 64-85. Shmuel Ettinger, "Yitzhak Baer Z'L," S. Ettinger, H. Beinart, M. Stern (eds.), *Sefer Zikaron Le-Yitzhak Baer*, pp. 9-20; David Myers, *Re-inventing the Jewish Past: European Jewish Intellectuals and the Zionist Return to History*, New York: Oxford University Press: 1995, pp. 109-128.

15 Leo Strauss, *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft*, Berlin: Akademie Verlage, 1930.

16 On the intellectual biography of Leo Strauss in the 1920's and 1930's, I first want to thank Dr. Thomas Meyer, Dr. Eugene Sheppard and Dr. Philipp von Wussow for their generous help and suggestions. I used the following literature: Meyer, "Yitzhak Fritz Baer und Leo Strauss"; Eugene Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher*, Brandeis University Press, 2006, pp. 51-117; Joshua Parens, "Leo Strauss on Farabi, Maimonides et al. in 1930's," M. D. Yaffe and R. S. Ruderman (eds.), *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s,* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 157-169; Philipp von Wussow "Leo Strauss on returning: some methodological aspects", *Philosophical Reading* IX (2017), pp. 18-24.

the critical appreciation of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* between the two world wars.

Fritz Yitzhak Baer: the Cultural and Political Ambiguity of Isaac Abravanel

Baer opens his article with a programmatic statement:

> Isaac Abravanel is one of the few Jewish political leaders of the Middle Ages to whom it is worthwhile and possible to devote an entire book. The course of his life is known to us in its broad lines; we possess his monumental books infused with political wisdom [science], which raise in us the desire to understand the relationship of their author to the essential problems of his times. If we could succeed in understanding at least one of these Jews whose continual work and employment were the service of kings, we could then remove the veil obscuring the real face of this typical Jewish figure [the Court Jew], a figure responsible for great disasters, but also a source of great consolation.[17]

Baer's call was heard: within twenty years of the publication of Baer's article, the Zionist academic elite became interested in Abravanel's political work, considered and checked Abravanel's positive or negative contribution to Jewish politics. One such work is Benzion Netanyahu's *Don Isaac Abravanel, Statesman and Philosopher,* published in Philadelphia in 1953.[18] Needless to say, these two decades were also those of Nazism, world war, Shoah, and the conflictual foundation of the State of Israel. Yet Baer's opening statement was also a clear criticism of the past, of the only academic book on Abravanel existing at his time, Jacob Guttmann's 1916 *Die religionsphilosophischen Lehren des Isaak Abravanel*, and of the methodological limitations of this work written in the spirit of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Indeed, Guttmann did not devote even a single one of his 11 chapters to Abravanel's political thought. Although Guttmann presents his book in the *Vorwort* as a reparation of a scholarly "*Unrecht*" (injustice) inflicted on Abravanel and his work,

17 Baer, "Don Izhaq Abarbanel," p. 241. (My translation.)

18 Benzion Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel, Statesman and Philosopher*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998.

he declares on page six already that "Abravanel was not an original thinker, who could have enriched by his own intuitions the development of Jewish philosophy of religion in any new direction."[19] For Baer, Guttmann failed to study the essential link between Abravanel's political life and its elaboration and reflection within his exegetical, theological and philosophical writings. In his 1931 inaugural lecture at the Institute of Jewish History in Jerusalem, beautifully studied by David Myers, Baer insisted on the hermeneutical-political structure of historical inquiry.[20] "Historical knowledge is from beginning to end knowledge of oneself. This is its finality. At first, men begin to inquire into their past to clarify a political question, the origins of a given political situation…." Baer continues: "History is concerned with and loves details. But in every detail it sees the whole … it sees in every [individual] … the inner force."[21]

From the very first lines of his article on Abravanel, Baer intended to point to the failure of the former Jewish *Wissenschaft*. Exemplary of the *Wissenschaft's* failed contextualization of Abravanel's work is the beginning of the third chapter of Guttmann's book, which, after the biography and bibliography of Abravanel, initiates the study of Abravanel's work:

> A special discussion of the doctrine of God and particularly of the doctrine of the divine attributes, developed with predilection by Arabic and Jewish philosophy of religion, is not to be found in Abravanel's work.[22]

Whereas the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* had imposed theological and philosophical standards on Abravanel's work, which were not central to his work, Baer proposed a way to correct the *Wissenschaft's* abstract contextualization; he developed a new historical and political contextualization of documents and literary sources linked to Abravanel. For Baer, Abravanel's life and work offered a unique opportunity to understand a central figure of Jewish history: the Court Jew. Instead of looking for a new *Religionsphilosophie* in Abravanel's work, Baer sought to make of Abravanel a case-study of the political tension between the Court elite and plain Sephardic Jews.

19 Guttmann, *Die Religionphilosophischen Lehren*, pp. VII, 6.
20 Myers, *Re-inventing the Jewish Past*, pp. 116-118.
21 Yitzhaq Baer, *Mehkarim ve-masot be-toldotyisrael*, vol. 2, p. 9. [English translation partly taken from Myers, *Re-inventing the Jewish Past*, p. 116].
22 Guttmann, *Die Religionphilosophischen Lehren*, p. 48.

Baer characterizes the Court Jew as an ambiguous political figure because of his dual political function at the Court and in the Jewish community. Baer explains Abravanel's ambiguity as a Court Jew through the latter's political, economic, and cultural association with the Christian elites of his times, an association which entailed deep tensions, if not contradiction, regarding Abravanel's role as a Jewish community leader. On the fourth page of his article, Baer formulates this contradiction as such: "In the year in which Abravanel arrived in the Kingdom of Castile, the expulsion of the Jews from Andalusia was proclaimed, and, later, other projects of local expulsion were advanced, until the decision of a general expulsion of the Jews from all the territories of the kingdom was reached." Although the politics of the Catholic kings was oriented against the Jews, "many Jews, among them Rabbi Isaac Abravanel, responded positively to their offer [to serve them as economic agents]."[23] As in Guttmann's biographic introduction, Baer insisted on the social contradiction which brought Court Jews to be agents of the new anti-Jewish policy of Catholic monarchs. Yet whereas Guttmann approached this policy and the subsequent expulsion of the Jews in terms of "destiny" (*Schicksal*) and *Katastrophe*, Baer searched, using his historiographical method, for the "particular … the living force of the period and of a historical movement…."[24] The dynamic tension between Court Jews and the rest of the community, as well as its role in the implementation of the Jewish policy of the Catholic kings, are set at the heart of Baer's new historical investigation of the Sephardic Court Jews. In this respect, Abravanel appears to Baer to be different than his fellow Court Jews. Whereas Abraham Senior and Meir Melamed surrendered to the "moral and practical pressure of the [Catholic] kings" and converted in order to continue to serve as "perfect heralds of the [new] absolutist regime," "Isaac [Abravanel] was filled with a fierce hatred against this regime […] and his heart was bounded to the suffering and hopes of the persecuted Jews and conversos in Spain."[25] Baer explains Abravanel's difference from the other Court Jews through the latter's new cultural profile, which was apparent in his anti-monarchical attitude, both "a consequence of his personal experience of political life" and "a conception deeply rooted in his heart and theoretically grounded."[26]

23 Baer, "Don Izhaq Abarbanel," p. 244. (My translation.)
24 Baer, *Mehkarim ve-masot*, vol. 2, p. 10.
25 Baer, "Don Izhaq Abarbanel", p. 244. (My translation.)
26 Baer, "Don Izhaq Abarbanel", p. 242.

According to Baer, Abravanel's new cultural profile made him a complex and contradictory specimen of the Jewish Iberian Court Jew, an ambiguity which manifested itself in a crucial moment in Abravanel's life: his participation in the rebellion of some leading aristocratic families against the newly crowned Portuguese King João II and his new policies in the early 1480s. In the first years of his reign, João II decided to revise his father's alliances with the leading noble families of Portugal, and, more specifically, with Abravanel's patron, Dom Fernando II, Duke of Bragança. These families' active opposition to King João II's new policies led to a palace coup by the king, in which he succeeded in condemning the duke to capital punishment, and forced most of the latter's family and allies to leave Portugal.[27] Aware of the complexity of this moment, which could be labeled as both a rebellion and a provocative royal policy, Baer insists that Abravanel participated in the "rebellion" which led to the end of his career at the Portuguese Court and also to the execution of his Christian patron, the Duke of Bragança. Relying on the documents published by Carl Gebhardt in addendum to his 1929 edition of Leone Ebreo*'s Dialoghi d'Amore*,[28] which testify to Abravanel's economic and political association with the Bragança rebellion party, Baer added a cultural and literary dimension to Abravanel's collaboration with the Bragança clan. To this end, Baer used a Portuguese letter written earlier by Abravanel to a member of the Bragança clan[29] in order to establish that Abravanel shared with his Christian patron "a common language, free of any particular religious or national garment, the language of humanism."[30]

The academic rediscovery of Abravanel's humanistic letter was the result of a joint effort between such Portuguese and Jewish German scholars as Carolina Michaelis de Vasconcelos (1851-1925), Joaquim de Carvalho (1892-1958), Carl Gebhardt (1881-1934), and Jakob Guttmann, in collaboration with a scion of the Abravanel family, Jeanette Schwerin-Abravanel (1852-1899), a leading female figure in

27 Luis Adão da Fonseca, *D. João II*, Rio de Mouro: Circulo de Leitores, 2005, pp. 59-65.

28 Carl Gebhardt, "Regesten," in C. Gebhardt. *Dialoghi d'amore: Hebraeische Gedichte*, Heidelberg, 1929, pp. 1-66.

29 Jeannette Schwerin, "Ein Brief Don Isaac Abravanels in portugiesischer Sprache," *Magzin für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* 18 (1891), pp. 133-145. Three years earlier, she published a partial German translation of Yehuda Abravanel's *Dialoghi*: *Des Leone Hebreo (Jehuda Abarbanel) Dialogue über die Liebe aus dem Italienischen übertragen von Jeannette Schwerin-Abarbanel*, Berlin 1888.

30 Baer, "Don Izhaq Abarbanel," p. 241.

the beginning of German social work. Before Baer, scholars had already pointed to the cultural proximity between Abravanel and his patrons. For Jeanette Schwerin, "the letter shows a common character of the writer and the addressee, it reveals in the two men chevaliers of thought and a highly philosophical conception of life." Noting the "*Intimität des Freundschaftsverhältnisses*" between Abravanel and his addressee, Jeanette Schwerin-Abravanel concludes her introduction to the letter by insisting on the letter's "pure Portuguese language," perfectly adapted to "philosophical reasoning," and depicting Don Isaac Abravanel as a "*Mann von allgemeiner Bildung*."[31] Ten years after publishing his monography *Leão Hebreo Filosofo* (Coimbra, 1918), the great Portuguese historian of philosophy Joaquim Carvalho (1892-1958) republished Abravanel's Portuguese letter in the new Portuguese Journal *Revista de Estudos Hebraicos*, concluding his introductive note on the cultural position of Abravanel:

> No doubt that Abravanel was endowed with a deep feeling of the Eternal and with a resignation to His omnipotent will, thereby following the pure Israelite attitude toward life. Yet, he assimilated the contemporaneous ideological background in such a measure that a Christian could subscribe to his letter – all the more so since he wrote in the rhetorical and erudite taste of the prose-writers of his time.[32]

For Carvalho, Abravanel, and even more so, his firstborn son, Yehuda Abravanel, incarnated the ambiguities of the birth of modern philosophy. Between submission to "philosophy as a closed and ordered system, in which, if not relying on revelation, the logical process of the spirit consisted uniquely in facilitating or acquiring its intellection" and "the dawn of modern thought"[33] (understood as the affirmation of subjectivity), Isaac Abravanel and Yehuda Abravanel constituted ambiguous social, cultural, and historical figures. Defined as "foreign to the narrow Israelite culture…," Carvalho even sustained that Isaac Abravanel and Yehuda Abravanel "could have been Christian, Arab or Jew." For Baer, this indetermination of Abravanel's cultural background expressed itself on the one hand in

31 Schwerin, "Ein Brief," p. 134.

32 Joaquim de Carvalho, "Uma Epistola de Isaac Abravanel," *Revista de Estudos Hebraicos* 1 (1928), p. 235. (My translation.)

33 Joaquim de Carvalho, *Leão Hebreo Filosofo*, Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade, 1918, p. 35.

the adoption of "the language of humanism," "free from any religious or national garment" ("מופשטת מכל לבוש דתי ולאומי מיוחד"); on the other hand, Abravanel's Jewish-Christian indetermination drove him also to reject the new monarchical "absolutism," as expressed in João II's new anti-aristocratic policies and in the Catholic monarch's new anti-Jewish policies.

The great novelty of Baer's article was not in his capacity to identify the complex background behind Abravanel's political and cultural association with the Christian noble elite. This had already been done from a modern Portuguese perspective by Joaquim de Carvalho, who related Abravanel to new cultural and political developments of the first Portuguese Republic (1910-1926). Baer's decisive contribution was to connect Abravanel's complex cultural background with his attitude toward Scripture, expressed in his anti-monarchical commentary on 1 Samuel 8, quoted at the beginning of this paper. Abravanel wrote this commentary after the great political crisis between his clan (around the Duke Fernando de Bragança) and King João II, and just after his escape from Portugal to Castile in 1483. Although Abravanel claims in his autobiographical introduction to the commentary that he did not partake in the plot against the king, Baer considered very innovatively and creatively that the anti-monarchical views expressed by Abravanel were a major factor in his ideological inclination toward the aristocratic party which rejected the "absolutist" policies of King João II.

> The solution of this contradiction [plot of the Bragança clan or political maneuver of the king] can be found in the hypothesis that the secret preparation for a rebellion could be interpreted from different perspectives. Yet one must take first into account … that R. Isaac Abravanel displayed in all his books a fierce hatred of autocratic regimes and viewed constitutional frameworks which limit political power as much as possible as the medicine for the diseases of States. Apparently, this opinion did not only result from his personal experience of political life but was deeply rooted in his heart and theoretically grounded. Maybe this opinion was one of the reasons which brought him to participate in the aristocratic rebellion [against the king] in Portugal. Indeed, what he wrote afterwards in his books [especially in his commentary on 1 Samuel 8] was fixed in his thinking before [the political crisis of 1481-1483] and even partially written.[34]

34 Baer, "Don Izhaq Abarbanel," p. 242. (My translation.)

Through this political contextualization, Abravanel's most original political text, his anti-monarchical commentary on 1 Samuel 8, becomes the literary and philosophical expression of Abravanel's association with the Christian Renaissance elite and with its new humanistic ideology. Baer even went so far as explaining Abravanel's resistance to conversion at the time of the 1492 expulsion out of his "hatred" of absolutism. "Men like Abraham Senior and Alfonso dela Cavaleria," writes Baer, "were without doubt devoted defenders of the absolutist regime [of the Catholic kings]. Isaac Abravanel, however, deadly abhorred this regime…."[35]

This statement seems to contradict Baer's famous social and political understanding of "Jewish Averroism" as a "theoretical justification" of the 12th, 13th and 14th-century social and religious detachment of Jewish elite from the common behavior of the community. The philosophical distinction between the heart and the envelope in religion led, according to Baer, to a treason of the clerks in the great 1391-1415 crisis. Baer seems to consider Abravanel's humanism differently than the "dangerous Jewish Averroism." Although this "historical-theological" argument is only fully developed in *History of the Jews in Christian Spain* published in 1945, Baer already sought to unearth the "class struggle" which informed the tension between mystical-conservative and philosophical Jewish sources in several articles written in the 1930's.[36] Yet in the struggle between the Court elite and the poor, which Baer transposed to the tension between rational philosophy and mystical-conservative trends, the stoic, anti-political, ascetic, and messianic motives are considered as having strengthened the social and religious cohesion of the community. In this regard, Abravanel's humanism, as far as it relied on stoicism and on social and political criticism, was not part of the dangerous philosophical elitism of Court Jews. It is this contradiction between Abravanel's social profile and the content of his thought that made Abravanel of historic interest to Baer:

> Thus Abravanel, throughout his life, rejected what he saw in his environment. In his books … he dreamt of being released from the courts of the kings, of sufficing himself with the necessary, and of living in purity and simplicity like Adam in *Gan Eden*. He waited

35 Baer, "Don Izhaq Abarbanel," p. 244. (My translation.)

36 See for example: Baer, *Galut*, Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1936; Baer, "*Todros Ben Yehudah ve-zemano,*" *Zion* 2 (1937), 19-55; Baer, "Ha-megamah ha-datit-hevratit shel 'Sefer Hasidim'," *Zion* 3 (1938), pp. 1-50; Baer, "Ha-reka ha-histori shel 'Raya Mehemma'," *Zion* 5 (1940), pp. 1-44.

> impatiently for the return of humanity to its original state and to the messianic redemption. Yet he was always brought back to the dramas of political life by his lust for power and by his desire for political leadership – the right occupation for a philosopher trained in the political philosophy of Aristotle and for a man of the Renaissance aspiring for grandeur.[37]

This lyrical paragraph is far from being a mere reflection on Abravanel's self-image as an *Anti-Courtier*; rather, it seems to embody much of Baer's own social, cultural and political stance as a member of the Jewish and Zionist establishment.

In later sections of his article, Baer further explains Abravanel's humanism, which, in addition to medieval Jewish, Islamic and Christian sources, draws upon new stoic sources, and develops a new historical and realistic interpretation of biblical narratives from this eclectic learning. According to Baer's vivid words of praise:

> Abravanel moved from scholastics to reality and to the understanding of the nature of human affairs. And by understanding in a naturalistic manner the stories of the Torah and the Prophets, he strengthened the faith [of his readership] in the biblical text in its concrete meaning, which was until then covered by the fog spread by the "masters of the secret and figurative meaning" such as Maimonides and Ibn Ezra …, since the words of the Bible are closer to nature than the medieval commentators thought.[38]

For Baer, Abravanel's anti-monarchical interpretation of 1 Samuel 8 is rooted in a larger conception of human historical evolution as "a progressive decadence from man's natural and original condition." Abravanel's refusal to interpret the institution of monarchy in 1 Samuel 8 according to the medieval distinction between the limited power of the legitimate king and the absolute power of the tyrant relies, according to Baer, on Abravanel's rejection of human technology and civilization, the institution of kingship being just another example of man-made institutions replacing the natural and original human order. Following Baer's interpretation, Abravanel's strong support of a republican regime is the outcome of his neo-stoic humanism, learned from the

37 *Ibid*., p. 245. (My translation.)
38 *Ibid*., p. 246. (My translation.)

Christian elites. It delineates a new attitude toward political power, which Baer distinguishes from the "medieval philosophical apologetics" clearly associated, like the Jewish elite, with the justification of monarchy.[39]

Nonetheless, Abravanel's greatest contribution in the eyes of Baer did not lie in his rapprochement "of the Venetian Republic to the absolute [political] ideal,"[40] but in the fact that "he brought back the apology of Judaism to its political predicament, from which it departed in the Hellenistic Period."[41] Indeed, Abravanel rediscovered through neo-stoic humanism the theocratic regime in the times of the Judges, which for him was the closest to the natural and divine original order.

> Government was in the hands of Judges elected by the people and by divine providence. Their role was to administrate justice to the people and to lead the wars of the Lord only according to temporary ordinances. The Israelites lived then according to the just laws and norms written in the Torah of Moses, which are different from the contractual laws of other people and even from the Noachide commandments.[42]

The depicted ambiguity of Abravanel's political position as a Court Jew and a community leader is reflected in this twofold model of the republic and the theocracy of the Judges. In 1932, five years before Baer's article was published, Buber published his book *Königtum Gottes*, in which he developed the idea of a theocratic-anarchic moment that played a decisive formative role in biblical history. The ambiguity of the republican and theocratic models, rediscovered by Baer in Abravanel, seems to echo the "theopolitical paradox" of Buber's *Königtum Gottes*: "Isn't the sociologic utopia of a voluntary community only the immanent side of direct theocracy?"[43] The anarchical, free community transposed to the ancient "Beduin" society is the other side of God's theocracy, of God's dwelling in Israel's history. Largely in line with Buber's insistence on the "charismatic authority" of the Judges for "a limited mission" without the political finality of founding a dynasty, Baer concludes his exposition

39 See *Ibid.*, p. 254-256.
40 *Ibid.*, p. 256.
41 *Ibid.*, p. 248.
42 *Ibid.*, p. 256. (My translation.)
43 "Ist doch die soziologische 'Utopie einer Gemeinschaft aus Freiwilligkeit nichts anderes als die Immanenzseite der unmittelbaren Theokratie?" (Martin Buber, *Königstum Gottes*, Berlin, 1932, p. 144).

of Abravanel's theological-political views as being a clear understanding of the authentic Jewish regime (theocracy), of its superiority over other historical regimes, but also as presenting a correct view of its historical counterpart: the republican regime.

> The humanist is a sworn republican. Among the political regimes of his time, the Republic of Venice appeared to Abravanel as coming closest to the absolute ideal. Yet the ideal and divine constitution was only given in the Torah of Moses and fully realized during the rule of the Judges over Israel.[44]

Leo Strauss: Jewish-Islamic versus Jewish-Christian Model

Proximity?

Baer's historical reconstitution of Abravanel's ambiguous model of the republic and the theocracy ends with a footnote referring to the recent scholarly work of Leo Strauss, his former colleague at the *Akademie* in Berlin. Before sending his readers to Strauss' 1935 German book *Philosophie und Gesetz* and his 1936 French article "*Quelques remarques sur la science politique de Maïmonide et de Fârâbî*,"[45] Baer remarks the following:

> The laws of the Torah among medieval philosophers and apologists [אפולוגטים]! This is a topic almost completely neglected until today. And yet, it was a central principle in the history of [Jewish] apologetics. The Torah as an ideal constitution which was bound to accomplish itself in messianic times, was the first of all principles for Jewish believers until the *Haskalah*.[46]

Following these enthusiastic words of praise for a theological-political approach of Jewish philosophical apologetics, Baer refers to a footnote in Strauss' French article, published just a few months before the publication of his own article. Strauss' footnote appears at the end of a paragraph in which Strauss defines the ideal city established by the Maimonidean

44 Baer, "Don Izhaq Abarbanel," p. 256. (My translation.)
45 Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 2 Philosophie und Gesetz – Frühe Schriften*, H. Meier (Herg.), 3-123; 125-158.
46 Baer, "Don Izhaq Abarbanel", p. 256. (My translation.)

Messiah. "The Messiah," writes Strauss, "being a king-philosopher, will establish for all time 'the perfect city' whose inhabitants will apply themselves, according to their respective faculties, to the knowledge of God, and he will thereby bring to an end the evils which today trouble the cities."[47] A few lines before the footnote referring to Strauss, Baer pointed in his article at Abravanel's view of the government of the Judges as the ideal Jewish regime. The passage to which Baer referred in Strauss' French article, however, insists on "the eternal peace achieved by the [king-philosopher] Messiah" through a re-centering of Jewish political society around a socially graduated contemplation of the divine.

The tension between Baer and Strauss' understanding of the genuine Jewish political regime becomes even clearer when studying the footnote to which Baer refers in Strauss' 1936 article:

> We do not take up in the present article the important question concerning the relation between the explication of the Mosaic laws given by Maimonides, and political philosophy. We only note here the fact that Maimonides twice cites passages from the Nicomachean Ethics in order to explain Biblical commandments (Guide III, 43, p. 96a [p. 572] and III, 49 beg.).[48]

As Baer understood and enthusiastically lauded, Strauss points here to the articulation of "Mosaic laws" and "political philosophy." He does so by referring to two passages in chapters 43 and 49 of the third book of Maimonides' *Guide*, both of which refer to the eighth book of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. In chapter 49, Maimonides echoes much of the beginning of the eighth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* on φιλία, friendship or civil affection between men.[49] Of special interest to Strauss and Baer was the connection between Aristotle's statement that "friendship appears to be the bond of the state [τας πόλεις συνέχειν]"[50]

47 Leo Strauss, "Some Remarks on the political science of Maimonides and Farabi", *Interpretation* 18 (1990), p. 20. [translation by Robert Bartlett]. For the French original text, see Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 2*, *ibid.*, p. 151.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 29. For the French original text, see Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 2*, *ibid.*, p. 151.

49 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics,* trans. H. Rackham, London and Cambridge Mss.: Harvard University Press, 1952, pp. 450-515.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 452-453.

and Maimonides' view on "the great purpose of Law" [אכבר מקאצד אלשריעה] being to reinforce "love and mutual assistance" among Jews.[51]

> It is well known that friends are something that is necessary for man throughout his whole life. Aristotle has already set this forth in the ninth [eighth] book of the "Ethics". For in a state of health and happiness, a man takes pleasure in their familiar relationship with him; in adversity, he has recourse to them … The same things may be found to a much greater extent in the relationship with one's children and also in the relationship with one's relatives. For fraternal sentiments and mutual love and mutual help can be found in their perfect form only among those who are related by ancestry. Accordingly a single tribe that is united through a common ancestor – even if he is remote – because of this, love one another, help one another, and have pity on one another; and the attainment of these things is the greatest purpose of the Law. Hence harlots are prohibited, because through them lines of ancestry are destroyed.[52]

In chapter 43, Maimonides references a later passage in the eighth book of *Nichomachean Ethics*, which Strauss saw as a further esoteric allusion to the political nature of Jewish law.

> The Feast of Tabernacles, which aims at rejoicing and gladness, lasts for seven days, so that its meaning be generally known. The reason for its taking place in the season in question is explained in the *Torah*, "When thou gatherest in thy labors out of the field" (Exod. xxiii. 16); this refers to the season of leisure, when one rests from necessary labors. In the ninth [eighth] book of the "Ethics", Aristotle states that this was the general practice of religious communities in ancient times. He says literally: The ancient sacrifices and gatherings used to take place after the harvesting of the fruit. They were, as it were, offerings given because of leisure.[53]

51 Moise Ben Maimoun, *Dalalat Al Hairin Le Guide des Egarés*, trans. S. Munk, Osnabrück: Otto Zeller, 1964, vol. 3, p. 113 [Arabic part].

52 Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed,* trans. Shlomo Pines, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963, pp. 601-602. Maimoun, *Dalalat*, 113.

53 *Ibid*, pp. 571-572. Maimoun, *Dalalat*, p. 96.

Maimonides' quotation of Aristotle seems to first integrate the Feast of Tabernacles in the natural order of ancient societies, the succession of labor and leisure. Yet Maimonides' quotation of Aristotle is taken from a passage which opens in the following way:

> But all associations [κοινωνίαι] are parts as it were of the association of the State [μορίοις της πολιτικης]. Travelers, for instance, associate together for some advantage, namely to procure some of their necessary supplies. But the political association too, it is believed, was originally formed, and continues to be maintained, for the advantage of its members: the aim of the lawgivers is the good of the community [το κοινη συμφερον], and justice is sometimes defined as that which is the common advantage. Thus the other associations aim at some particular advantage; for example sailors combine to seek the profits of seafaring in the way of trade or the like […] and similarly the members of a tribe or parish [and some associations appear to be formed for the sake of pleasure, for example religious guilds and dining-clubs, which are unions for sacrifice and social intercourse. But all these associations seem to be subordinate to the association of the State which aims not at a temporary advantage but at one covering the whole of life (εις άπαντα τον βίον).] combine to perform sacrifices and hold festivals in connection with them, thereby both paying honor to the gods and providing pleasant holidays for themselves. For it may be noticed that the sacrifices and festivals of ancient origin take place after harvest, being in fact harvest-festivals; this is because that was the season of the year at which people had most leisure [μάλιστα 'εσχόλαζον]. All these associations then appear to be parts of the association of the State [μορία της πολιτικης].[54]

According to Strauss' reading, Maimonides' quotation of *Nicomachean Ethics* is not limited to the exoteric allusion of the natural and historical background of the Feast of Tabernacles, but is endowed with an esoteric allusion to the political finality of the seemingly limited norms of Jewish law. As stated earlier in Strauss' article, "this means that only Moses is the philosopher-legislator in Plato's sense or the 'first Chief' in Farabi's sense. But Maimonides does not say this explicitly: he limits himself to indicating the signs which suffice for one 'who will understand,'

54 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics,* pp. 486-489.

for an attentive and duly instructed reader." Understood in its esoteric meaning, Strauss' footnote referring to the two Maimonidean quotations of Aristotle proposes a new contextualization of Jewish law, defined not by its particularity, but by its finality: "the foundation of the perfect nation."[55] The relationship between the peculiarity of Jewish law and its political finality is similar to the Aristotelian finalist understanding of particular communities as parts of the political [complete] community. In this sense, Baer was right to exalt Strauss for the new field opened by his former *Kollege*'s philosophical and political understanding of Jewish law.

> The perfect law, the divine law, is distinguished from the human laws in that it aims not only at the well-being of the body, but also and above all at the well-being of the soul. This consists in man having sound opinions, above all concerning God and the Angels. The divine law has therefore indicated the most important of these opinions to guide man toward the well-being of the soul, but only in a manner which does not surpass the understanding of the vulgar. This is the reason it was necessary that the prophets have at their disposal the supreme perfection of the imaginative faculty: imagination makes possible the metaphorical exoteric representation of the truths whose proper, esoteric meaning must be concealed from the vulgar. For one neither can nor ought to speak of the principles except in an enigmatic manner; this is what not only "men of the law" but also philosophers say.[56]

In the paragraph of Strauss' article, to which Baer referred in his footnote, Strauss insisted on the expectation that the Torah as an ideal constitution should be realized in messianic times, according to Maimonides. Yet, in the quoted passage appearing just after the footnote, Strauss reveals that divine law already has political efficiency in exile, structuring the society hierarchically around the Law. Relying on Strauss, Baer understood that the political efficiency of the Law "was the first of all principles for Jewish believers up until the *Haskalah*."[57]

55 Strauss, "Some Remarks," p. 15. For the original French text, see Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 2*, pp. 144-145.

56 *Ibid*, pp. 17-18. For the French original text, see Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 2*, *ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

57 Baer, "Don Izhaq Abarbanel", p. 256. (My translation.)

Distance

Yet just after this mark of agreement between Baer and Strauss, the historian adds another remark, very different in its content:

> In the critical study of the laws of the Torah, only Abner [of Burgos], the convert preceded Abravanel, with of course the intent to abolish the *Torah*. Unfortunately, the Jews answered him only in general and neutral terms. The Apologists of the Hellenistic Period came closer to the empirical truth.[58]

Baer's footnote, which opened by praising Strauss' discovery of a genuine Jewish political philosophy, seems to end with a clear dissonance between the two former colleagues.

For Strauss, the centrality of Law and its socially graduated efficiency in Jewish society (through different epistemological and imaginative means) was at the heart of Maimonides' articulation of Judaism and political philosophy. For Baer, Abravanel was among the first Jewish thinkers to rediscover the Jewish Hellenistic understanding of the authentic Jewish regime – a discovery which made Abravanel a new thinker "who aspired to a political outlook, clear and well-founded, which was generally missing in the Medieval Period." Baer even adds that "Abravanel was not satisfied... with the conceptions of the [Jewish] philosophers who had more or less lost contact with political realities." For the historian of Jerusalem, the modernity of Abravanel lies in his return "to the political premises [of Jewish apologetics] from which Judaism had departed since the Hellenistic Period."[59]

Strauss and Baer's differing positions on the necessary redefinition of the Jewish political regime can be better understood from an earlier passage in Strauss' French article, which discusses the question of the medieval translation of the Greek concept of πολίς.

> The difference between the complete (*kamila*) communities regarding their size does not imply a difference regarding their internal structure: the city may be as perfect (*fadila*), i.e., directed by an ideal chief toward happiness, as the nation or the nations (*Musterstaat*, p. 54, 5-10. *Siyasat*, p. 50).

58 Baer, "Don Izhaq Abarbanel", p. 256. (My translation.)
59 *Ibid.*, p. 248.

There is always at least a theoretical preference for the city: it is not by chance that Farabi entitled his most complete political treatise *The Perfect City* and not *The Perfect Nation* (cf. also *Musterstaat*, p. 69, 17-19; this passage could be the direct source of the respective passage of Maimonides). One might say that the perfect city is the ancient core, borrowed from Plato's Republic that Farabi tries to guard and leave intact, however he may be compelled by the theological-political presuppositions of his time to enlarge the Platonic framework, to acknowledge the political unities larger than the city: the nation or nations.[60]

In a marginal note on this passage from the hand of Strauss himself, he refers to an interesting passage in his 1937 English article on Abravanel in which he discusses Baer's article:

> This criticism of all political, "artificial", life does not mean that Abravanel intends to replace the conception of the city as something "artificial" by the conception of nations or as of something "natural"; for, according to Abravanel, the existence of nations, i.e. the disruption of the one human race into a plurality of nations, is no less "artificial," no less a result of sin, than is the existence of cities.[61]

If Maimonides had succeeded in conserving the original Platonic concept of the πολίς in his views on the ideal regime of the Jewish nation (via the assimilation of Al-Farabi's political philosophy), for Strauss, Abravanel's "criticism of political organization is truly all-comprehensive"[62] and leads him not only to an "un-political," but to an "anti-political" outlook.[63] Strauss then defines what is "un-political" and even "anti-political" in Abravanel's thought, referring to Baer's article:

> As has been shown recently by Professor Baer, Abravanel takes over from Seneca's 90th letter the criticism of human civilization in general (of "artificial" and "superfluous" things) and of the city in particular.[64]

Indeed, the great philological discovery by Baer – that Abravanel's works

60 *Ibid*, p. 10. For the French original text, see Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 2*, p.135.
61 Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 2*, p. 209.
62 *Ibid.*
63 *Ibid.*, p. 208.
64 *Ibid.*

were imbued with humanistic Senequism – is interpreted by Strauss, not as a positive sign of Abravanel's association with Christian elites, nor as an interesting rediscovery of the Hellenistic understanding of a Jewish authentic regime, but as a corruption of the Platonic understanding of the πολίς. A corruption of the Greek understanding of πολίς to a Roman and stoic discourse on the intimate connection between city (*civitas*), crafts (*arifices*) and luxury (*luxuria*), is famously expressed in this passage of Seneca's 90th letter:

> Nature suffices for what she demands. Luxury (*a natura luxuria descivit*) has turned her back upon nature; each day she expands herself, in all the ages she has been gathering strength, and by her wit (*ingenio*) promoting the vices. At first, luxury began to lust for what nature regarded as superfluous (*supervacua*), then for that which was contrary to nature; and finally she made the soul a bondsman to the body, and bade it be an utter slave to the body's lusts (*corpori libidini deservire*). All these crafts (*artes*) by which the city (*civitas*) is patrolled – or shall I say kept in uproar – are but engaged in the body's business (*corporis negotium*); time was when all things were offered to the body as to a slave (*servo*), but now they are made ready for it as for a master (*domino*).[65]

Instead of being the locus of articulation between human life and ideal law, the city is transformed into a point of departure from the realm of the natural into the realm of artificiality. In this "artificial" transformation, the natural hierarchy between body and soul, as well as the natural order between men, degenerates into an indefinite process of submission to unlimited bodily desires and to human tyranny.

In the long footnote devoted to Baer's philological identification of the stoic sources of Abravanel's (anti-)political thought, Strauss first expresses his need to "make only some slight additions to the ample evidence adduced by Baer." He refers more precisely than his former colleague to a passage in Seneca's 90th letter concerning "life in the field": "Meadows beautiful without the use of art (*sine arte*), amid such scenes were their rude homes, adorned by rustic hand." This "*agreste domicilium*" is defended by Seneca as being "*secundum naturam*."[66] According to Strauss, this

65 Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales,* trans. R. M. Gummhere, London and Cambridge Mss.: Harvard University Press, 1970, vol. II, pp. 408-409.

66 *Ibid.*, pp. 426-427.

doctrine of Poseidonios (c. 135 BCE – c. 51 BCE), which concerned the Golden Age and "the government of the best and the wisest" at that time, was adopted by Abravanel with a theological modification, according to which "Divine Providence extended itself without any intermediary"[67] in the early age of humanity (and later in the time of Moses). In Abravanel's commentary on the reason for the punishment of the generation of [human] dispersion [דור הפלגה] (Gen. 11), one finds, as pointed out by Strauss, the Senequian opposition between "the sons of the fields" [בני שדה] and the "city which comprehends all the crafts" [עיר... כוללת המלאכות כולם]:

> Although they were given by the Lord and from the Heavens plenty of natural things necessary to their lives, although they were dispensed from work and labor and were prepared to occupy themselves with the perfection of their souls, their minds did not suffice themselves with what the Creator prepared for them in His natural and great gift. They directed their hands and thoughts to the invention of techniques for building a city which comprehends all crafts with a tower in the middle. [They did so] to associate themselves there [in the city] and to make themselves urban citizens, instead of being sons of the fields. They thought that their finality and perfection was the political union of the cities [or States]…. [68]

For Baer, this Senequian interpretation of human sins in Genesis 11 made him "discover the literal meaning of Scripture, which had been covered by the veil of *midrash* and later interpretations." In Baer's eyes, Abravanel "preceded the interpretation of modern biblical scholars" because he understood that the Jewish political regime was designed to maintain "the sons of Israel as close to the original natural condition [of humanity] as possible for men follwing the expulsion from Gan Eden."[69]

Abravanel's Senequism, and even his rediscovery of Josephus' criticism of the role of Cain as the "first to build a city" and "the first to put an end to that simplicity in which men lived before,"[70] are not valuted by Strauss as an important historical contribution to the understanding of

67 Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 2*, p. 208.
68 Abarbanel, *Perush al ha-Torah,* Jerusalem, 1964, vol. 1, p. 176. (My translation.)
69 Baer, "Don Izhaq Abarbanel," pp. 249, 256. (My translation.)
70 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities Books I-IV*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, Cambridge Mss.: Harvard University Press, 1961, pp. 28-29.

the biblical criticism of the state, and also of biblical political thought in general. Baer, conversely, sees this as a contribution to which modern Jewish scholarship and modern Jewish politics would return in modern times. For Strauss, Abravanel's Senequism was proof that "he [Abravanel] had undermined Maimonides' political philosophy of the law by contesting its ultimate assumption that the city is 'natural' and by conceiving the city as a product of human sin."[71]

Strauss' "slight additions" to Baer's philological discovery end with a cryptic reference to Aristotle's opening distinction in *The Nicomachean Ethics* between the "life of enjoyment [τον βίον απολαυστικον], the life of politics [ὁ βίος πολιτικὸς] and the life of contemplation [ὁ βίος θεωρετικὸς]."[72] Strauss mentions the Jewish reception of this Aristotelian distinction by quoting a passage in Maimonides' *Guide II, 30* which distinguishes between Cain and Abel "who both perished," and Seth, whose existence, in contrast, "perseverated." Strauss goes further and refers to Profiat Duran's explication of the same passage, which explains Maimonides' esoteric distinction between Cain, Abel and Seth by defining Cain as the one "whose endeavor is to gather money and to acquire properties," Abel as the one whose vocation is "to lead the people," and Seth as the one "who is the human theoretical intellect."[73] By adding these last philological additions to Baer's discovery, Strauss wanted to hint that Abravanel's criticism of civilization was in tension with an ancient and medieval tradition which considered political organization to be the right way to implement the necessary hierarchy between the intellect, the imagination and bodily desires. Abravanel's criticism of civilization destroys the ancient and medieval articulation φυσις/πολις in favor of a providential state of nature and a providential government, strongly disconnected from human political and technical civilization.

Strauss explains further the Abravanelian disjunction of Torah from the Maimonidean-Platonic understanding of Law by cryptically referring to Abravanel's interpretation of the gift of Torah, as derived not from the intellect agent, but from God "without intermediary." Therefore, the laws of the Torah drive the Sons of Israel towards a society which differs entirely from political laws whose natural finality is only "the preservation of the political order."[74]

71 Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 2*, p. 208.

72 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics,* pp. 12-15.

73 Moshe Ben Maimon, *More Nevuchim im perush Shem Tov ve-perush Efodi,* Yasnitz, 1742, p. 76b.

74 Abarbanel, *Perush Abarbanel al ha-Torah,* Jerusalem: Horev Press, 2008, vol. 2, p. 340.

The confrontation of Baer's footnote referring to the work of Strauss with Strauss' critical footnote on Baer's article unearths a clear dissonance between the two. Whereas Baer seems to understand Abravanel's political thought to be a genuine understanding of what Strauss defines in his 1935 book *Philosophie und Gesetz* as the ideal regime implied by the Torah, Strauss points to the tension between the Platonic, Farabian and Maimonidean understandings of the political dimension of Torah, and the Hellenistic and stoic Abravanelian tendency to dissociate Torah and πολις.

A Critique of the Jewish-Christian Ambiguity of Abravanel

The further course of Strauss' article provides that he agrees with Baer on the Christian origins of Abravanel's deviance from Jewish medieval philosophy:

> Of Christian origin is, above all, Abravanel's general conception of the government of the Jewish nation. According to him, that government consists of two kinds of government, of a government human and of a government spiritual or divine.[75]

Yet Strauss interprets Abravanel's assimilation of Christian political dichotomy (earthly versus celestial city) not as a sign of a new political and humanistic approach expressing the Jewish-Christian ambiguity of the Court Jew, but as the destruction of Maimonides' genuine political project to articulate revelation and philosophy on the grounds of a "rapprochement with Plato" through the Islamic philosophical traditions of Alfarabi, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Rushd. Baer read Strauss' harsh criticism of Guttmann's *Philosophie des Judentums*, and thought that maybe his own interpretation of Abravanel's rediscovery of the original Jewish regime was in line with Strauss' warning: "...the adequate scientific knowledge of Judaism is bought at the cost of the belief in the authority of revelation, at the cost of a considerable loss to the Jewish 'substance of life."[76] Yet whereas Baer took Abravanel's approach to human and biblical history for a new stoic naturalism, that is capable of retrieving

75 Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 2*, p. 222.

76 Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*, trans. E. Adler, Albany: SUNY, 1995, p. 45.

the original Ancient Judaism, Strauss understood Abravanel's criticism as an expression of the anti-rational and anti-political dichotomy between nature and the techno-political realm. Indeed, in the eight pages prior to discussing Baer's article, Strauss had already established the real nature of Abravanel's anti-rationalistic and anti-political stance. According to Strauss, Abravanel accepted only the exoteric part of Maimonides' philosophy, in accordance with traditional Jewish beliefs, while rejecting his esoteric project of a rational articulation of the Torah with the ideal law (and hence with nature).[77]

In his book *Philosophie und Gesetz,* Strauss suggested the articulation of a "recognition of the authority of revelation" with its philosophical elaboration into Plato's ideal State as being the alternative model to the failure of modern *Aufklärung*. For this reason, Abravanel's misunderstanding of the political or esoteric-Platonic essence of Jewish philosophy is understood by Strauss as a decisive step toward the decline of an authentic Jewish philosophy. A step which would eventually lead toward the constitution of modern criticism of orthodoxy and medieval theology, and in the later case of Spinoza to a complete disjunction of philosophy and revelation. Strauss concludes his 1937 article on Abravanel by relaying the link between Spinoza and Abravanel, a link already developed by Gebhardt and Carvalho, as mentioned earlier, but this time as proof of the problematic nature of Abravanel's political views. He writes: "To the same connection [the return to the original biblical meaning], belongs Abravanel's criticism of certain traditional opinions concerning the authorship of some biblical books, a criticism by which he paved the way for the much more thoroughgoing biblical criticism of Spinoza."[78]

In Strauss' view, Maimonides' political and philosophical project of justifying Jewish law relied not on a Jewish-Christian alliance, but exclusively on a Jewish-Islamic alliance, defined in *Philosophie und Gesetz* in the following way: "Plato's rapprochement to the Revelation (*die Annäherung Platons an die Offenbarung*) furnishes medieval thinkers with the starting point (*Ansatz*) from which they could understand the Revelation philosophically."[79] The German term *Annäherung* refers to a central motif in Hermann Cohen's famous 1915 article, *Deutschtum und Judentum*: the affinity between Judaism and central

77 See also Parens, "Leo Strauss on Farabi, Maimonides et al."

78 Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 2*, p. 226.

79 Strauss, *Philosophy and Law,* p. 76. (I slightly changed the translation.)

concepts of reformation (*die Verwandschaft von Juden mit Grundbegriffe der Reformation*) or the rapprochement of Protestantism to prophetism (*Annäherung an den Prophetismus*).[80] This rapprochement is defined by Cohen as the overlapping of the German Protestant Reformation and earlier Maimonidean Jewish "*Protestantismus*," relying on their common idealistic and ethical-rational orientation.[81] Strauss' replacement of the Jewish-Protestant alliance around the model of the *Aufklärung* with the medieval Jewish-Islamic alliance was, of course, an attack on the theological-political foundation of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Yet this attack should not only be attributed to the impact of the Nazi regime on Strauss' life and thought while exiled in France, and later in England, but rather to his search for an alternative model to liberalism as well, as can be read in his 1933 letter to Karl Löwith:

> I see no acceptable possibility to live under the swastika [*dem Hakenkreuz*], i.e., under a symbol that says nothing else to me except: "You and your kind, you are subhuman φυσει and therefore true pariahs." There exists here only *one* solution. We must repeatedly say to ourselves, we "men of science" – for so people like us called ourselves during the Arab Middle Ages – *non habemus locum manentem, sed quaerimus*... And, as to the substance of the matter: i.e., that Germany having turned to the right does not tolerate us, that proves absolutely nothing against right-wing principles. On the contrary: only on the basis of right-wing principles – on the basis of fascistic, authoritarian, *imperial* principles – is it possible with integrity, without the ridiculous and pitiful appeal to the *droits imprescriptables de l'homme*, to protest against the money grubbing bedlam [*das meskine Unwesen*]. I am reading Caesar's *Commentaries* with deeper understanding, and I think about Virgil: *Tu regere imperio... parcere subjectis et debellare superbos*. There exists no reason to crawl to the cross [*zu Kreuze zu kriechen*], to liberalism's cross as well, as long as somewhere in the world there yet glimmers a spark of the *Roman* thought [*des römischen Gedankens*]. And even then: better than any cross, the ghetto.[82]

80 Hermann Cohen, *Jüdische Schriften, Zweiter Band Zur Jüdischen Zeitgeschichte*, Berlin, p. 256.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 244.

82 William H. Altmann, *The German Stranger: Leo Strauss and National Socialism*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012, p. 227.

Far from forcing him back to liberalism, Strauss' 1933 exile from Germany led him to find a stable philosophical and historical axis in the attitude of Arab "men of science". This enabled him to face the catastrophe of the collapse of Germany from afar and to accept his Jewish fate. Perceiving Abravanel's thought from this perspective, Strauss was particularly prone to decipher in Abravanel's views the degeneration of the Jewish-Islamic political articulation of accepted religious norms and the philosophical drive toward perfection. Such degeneration could only lead, according to Strauss' historical vision, to a dangerous limitation of political philosophy, which would no longer rely on the virtuous circle of the "legal foundation of philosophy" and "the philosophical foundation of Law", leading from medieval Enlightenment to modern Enlightenment.

> One can with a certain right call Maimonides's position "medieval religious Enlightenment." With a certain right: namely if one accepts the view that not only for the modern Enlightenment and thus for the Age of Enlightenment *proper,* from which the expression "Enlightenment" is customarily *transferred* to certain phenomena of the Middle Ages (and of antiquity) but also for Maimonides and his predecessors and successors in the Middle Ages, it is a matter of the freedom of human thought, the "freedom of philosophizing." But one must not for a moment leave any doubt that these medieval philosophers were precisely *not* Enlighteners in the proper sense; for them it was *not* a question of *spreading* light, of educating the *multitude* to rational knowledge, of *enlightening;* again and again they enjoin upon the philosophers the duty of *keeping secret* from the unqualified multitude the rationally known truth; for them in contrast to the Enlightenment proper, that is, modern Enlightenment, the *esoteric* character of philosophy was unconditionally established. To be sure, even in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were men who, to quote Voltaire, claimed: "Quand la populace se mêle à raisonner, tout est perdu;" and on the other hand, even men like Maimonides had in mind *a certain* enlightenment of all men. But if one considers that the modern Enlightenment, as opposed to the medieval, generally *publicizes* its teachings, one will not object to the assertion that the medieval Enlightenment was essentially esoteric, while the modern Enlightenment was essentially exoteric.[83]

83 Strauss, *Philosophy and Law,* p. 102.

Retrieving in the first years of his exile from Germany esoteric medieval Enlightenment from the collapse of modern *Aufklärung*, Strauss could not interpret Abravanel's redefinition of Jewish political philosophy as a historical fact, opening new relations between philosophy, politics, religion, technique and nature. He was bound to see only a negative Christian influence on Jewish thought, with the fateful result of replacing the esoteric insertion of philosophy within the pre-modern political environments with the exoteric confusion of philosophy and modern constant transformation of political organization. By rejecting Abravanel in 1937, Strauss was struggling against time and tracing back the origin of a historical peril.

Conclusion

Following Baer's discovery of the twofold political model of Abravanel (republicanism and the theocracy of the Judges) and the dual cultural background (Renaissance Christian Humanism and Jewish medieval literature), Strauss was also driven to deal with the political dimension of Abravanel's work. Yet he devoted much effort to prove that Abravanel had no authentic republican concept and that his republicanism was nothing more than "a tribute he paid to the fashion of his time."[84] One of the main philological contributions of Strauss' article was to prove, in opposition to Baer's positive attitude towards theocracy, that Abravanel's antimonarchic interpretation of 1 Samuel 8 relied on Nicholas of Lyra's concept of God as *rex immediatus illius populi*, as the direct King over Israel.[85] For Lyra, as for Abravanel, Buber, and his followers, God's direct kingship made the demand for a human king *contra ordinationem Domini* (against the order of the Lord). If for Baer, Abravanel's republican-theocratic commentary on 1 Samuel 8 was a positive expression of his political and cultural association with the Christians, and possibly a model for a new Jewish society in *Eretz Israel*, for Strauss, Abravanel's republican-theocratic model eventually relied on a superficial humanism and a dangerous assimilation of Christian theocratic models which were eventually responsible for the end of an authentic political understanding of Judaism, and for the advent of Christian and Jewish *Aufklärung*'s lack of philosophical interest in Revelation. The Jewish-Christian ambiguity

84 Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 2*, p. 215.
85 *Ibid.*, p. 220.

of Abravanel is thus at the heart of the debate between Baer and Strauss on the interpretation of Abravanel's political contribution to Jewish history. For Baer, this Jewish-Christian ambiguity is the backdrop for the elaboration of new social, historical and political conceptions which expressed a genuine Jewish political model, but unfortunately proved unfruitful in a time of absolutism, expulsions and persecutions. For Strauss, Abravanel's Jewish-Christian ambiguity destroyed an authentic philosophical Platonic-Farabian understanding of Jewish law and accounted for future modern disastrous consequences. While both Baer and Strauss left the German-Jewish emancipation model behind them, no doubt their respective 1937 study of Abravanel's republican-theocratic model was also a reflection on its value for the new Jewish society in Palestine (in the case of Baer) or on its negative consequences for Jewish history (in the case of Strauss). The two former colleagues at the *Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* both displayed in their critical dialogue a multifaceted critique of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, pointing to its incapacity to understand Jewish political agency and Jewish political philosophy.